

1944: The shattering of the Third Reich's strategic of the Third Reich in the East A) The Winter Battles 1943/44: Whoever can replenish his losses first replenish his losses, gains the upper hand.... The dramas in front of the front lines of Army Groups Central and South during the winter months of 1943/44 are probably among the bloodiest episodes of World War II. Such bloodshed occurred here that it surpassed many much better known battles of the war. Nevertheless, hardly anything has survived in scientific and military literature to this day – despite, or perhaps because of, the enormous losses on the Soviet side. Especially in the section of the >Heeresgruppe Mitte< there were far-reaching Soviet objectives like the liberation of Belarus still in winter 1943/44. But this had to be aborted unsuccessfully already in February. Only with >Operation Bagration< could it be realized.¹ The losses of the Red Army were so high that they are covered up until today. As a result, the level of training of the Red Army had decreased to such an extent that in many units soldiers had to be used only as cannon fodder without training or were sent directly from areas that had just been recaptured to the front, where they usually fell during the first sortie in the fire of the German MG 42. In the spring of 1944, one of the longest and bloodiest Russian offensives of the war had also ended in the southern section of the Eastern Front. It was called the >Right Bank Dnieper Operation<. According to official Russian data, it lasted from December 24, 1943 to April 17, 1944, but in reality it continued until May 6, before it had to be terminated because it was unsuccessful. Again, officially 1200000 Soviet troops were sacrificed. The actual number of casualties in this operation in particular may have been much higher, since numerous Ukrainians called up at short notice were not taken into account in the Soviet reporting system. They, in particular, were almost always killed already during the first operation, as mentioned above. Officially, 4666 Soviet tanks were destroyed in the south. It should have been more. The 1944 Soviet winter and spring offensives in the center and southern part of the Eastern Front were intended to enable the reconquest of Belarus with an advance of the Soviet Army as far as East Prussia, as well as the occupation of Romania. The result of these bloody battles was a German defensive victory with insignificant loss of terrain. Russian losses were 5 to 10 times higher than those of the Wehrmacht. Often Stalin could not repeat this. But the Germans, too, were so battered by the fighting that the 14 armored divisions of >Heeresgruppe Süd< together could muster just 199 operational battle tank vehicles. It was foreseeable that after a break, the party in the East that could replenish its ranks most quickly in terms of personnel and materiel would win. The Soviets succeeded in quickly replenishing their badly thinned ranks and training them to some extent. Western Allied supplies provided the Red Army with unprecedented motorization potential. Much of the Russian army now drove U.S. trucks. British and U.S. tanks also filled the gaps that Russian tank production could not immediately fill. Again, the Wehrmacht avenged its failure to capture the Arctic ports in 1943! The fate of the German Eastern Front would therefore depend decisively on what the The fate of the German Eastern Front would therefore depend decisively on what replacements the homeland would provide in order to be able to survive the expected summer fighting in 1944. Hitler had promised the front an additional 1 million men in the fall of 1943, they were drafted, and armaments production in the Reich and German-occupied territories experienced the consequences of Speer's >armaments revolution< despite increasing bombing. But then, when it would have come down to it, something occurred about which silence is to be kept to this day. Was the fall of the Crimea to end Germany's ability to wage war? be ended? From November 1943 to May 1944, Germany defended the Crimea, even though it had long since been closed off from all land communications. Considering a threat to the Romanian oil area, which was important for Germany's fuel supply, and fearing that Turkey, which had been neutral until then, would pass into the Allied camp, Hitler had not brought himself to evacuate Crimea in time. We know today that Turkey was actually kept in line because of this. Crucial to a successful Crimean defense in the longer term would have been the Black Sea ports of Odessa and Nikolaev. However,

German army and navy commanders in the Black Sea succeeded in deceiving Hitler and even their own immediate superiors about the true situation. Thus, Chief of General Staff Zeitzler had assured in all sincerity that the former Russian war port of Nikolaev was in no danger – and exactly two days later it was taken by the Russians. Acting on his own authority, Admiral Brinkmann had already ordered the evacuation of the port of Odessa two weeks before it was reported to Hitler, and without the knowledge of Grand Admiral Dönitz, in early March. The abandonment of Odessa, thus unstoppable, meant a return of the Soviet Navy to the Black Sea and irreparable damage to Germany's position vis-à-vis Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria. Sufficient shipping space was available at the Romanian Black Sea port of Constanta to transport the 50000 tons of supplies needed each month to the Crimean port of Sevastopol. Everything seemed to be no problem, because in November and March 1944, more than the required quantities of supplies were transferred to the Crimea. The Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe dominated the Black Sea seemingly unchallenged, and General Jaenecke's 17th Army repulsed all attempts by the Red Army to land in the Crimea. 180,000 German and Romanian soldiers in Crimea had enough supplies and ammunition delivered to the peninsula to last five to six months. After beating off the invasion in the west, according to Grand Admiral Dönitz, the intention was to recapture the lost territories in southern Ukraine and connect the Crimean peninsula to the land link. However, on April 8, 1944, the Soviet troops with 470000 men started to attack at the northern approaches of the Crimea. While the German troops held out against the Russian superiority at the so-called >Tatarengraben<, the Soviets did as before Stalingrad and broke through the positions of the Romanian 10th Division. The Russians had thus gained access to the open space of the Crimea. The German leadership then had to order the rapid withdrawal of all 17th Army formations to the area of the Sevastopol fortress. The withdrawal movement on Sevastopol resembled running the gauntlet, since the Russians had already been informed of the beginning of the withdrawal movement. It is not clear whether this was only due to the indiscipline of the Romanians, who, in spite of the ordered radio and telephone silence, had previously made pointless phone calls. Three Russian armies including a tank corps, several independent brigades and a total of 30 rifle divisions now attacked the six German and seven Romanian divisions in the final battle for the Crimean peninsula. Quite battered, the divisions of the two Axis powers arrived at the fortress of Sevastopol. The Romanian formations were close to disintegration, the German divisions only reinforced regiments. After their loss-making retreat to the fortress, about 35000 soldiers remained in the main battle line and another 90000 men in the stage – an unfavorable balance of forces because of the catastrophic material situation. The 17th Army possessed just 81 artillery pieces, 36 heavy Pak and nine assault guns. Therefore, Hitler ordered the supply generals to bring guns, ammunition and food to the besieged fortress by ships. The two local Kriegsmarine commanders, Admiral Schulz (Crimea) and Admiral Brinkmann (Black Sea), had assured Hitler in a lecture at the Berghof that sufficient supplies for 100,000 men could be transported to Sevastopol. Incredibly, however, the supply ships departed empty for Sevastopol, picking up evacuation personnel on the way back to Romania. Investigations ordered by Hitler revealed that the ordered supplies had never reached the loading port of Constanta. Again, the supply generals had failed – failed because they wanted to fail?¹⁻³ When the last parts of the 5th Corps arrived in the Sevastopol fortress area on 16 April 1944, the long prepared evacuation plan by Kriegsmarine ships and Luftwaffe aircraft had already started four days earlier. By April 20, 1944, 67,000 men had already been shipped to Romania. Within 18 more days, the rest would have been done. But then the transport, which had gone smoothly and without casualties until then, was restricted by Hitler to non-combat units, civilians and prisoners of war. Several combat battalions were still fed instead. It was not to be of any use! The old Russian fortifications, which had proved to be a great danger for the German Wehrmacht as late as 1942, had not been repaired before. Instead, they worked on the embellishment of the staff quarters. Entire houses, as Paul Carell wrote, were

transformed into old German farmhouse parlors. With the right armor, the strongest fortress in the world in 1942 would have been able to hold off the Soviets, most of whom were running without siege artillery, for a long time. This was not the case because in Sevastopol fortress the former Soviet bunkers and forts had not been restored. The commander of the 98th Infantry Division, General Reinhardt, even had to have picks and shovels gathered on the site of the Sevastopol fortress, which still came from the battles of 1942. Only then could the old positions be provisionally occupied. Questions arise. After requests by German commanders to evacuate

Sevastopol had been rejected by Hitler, the Soviet 4th Ukrainian Front launched a major attack on Sevastopol on May 5. Only after the Russians had captured the commanding Sapun Heights after the heaviest fighting three days later did Hitler finally authorize the evacuation of the remnants of the 17th Army, which were now in an extremely dangerous position. The fighting strength of the 17th Army was still 64700 men on May 8, 1944. In spite of the strongest Soviet air attacks and massive U-boat operations, the German-Romanian warships and transport ships were able to evacuate 37500 men by May 13 - 25677 men and 6011 wounded of them in the last three days alone. It could have been different!

In fact, the 17th Army intended to embark from the Crimea during the night of May 10-11, 1944. More than 190 German and Romanian warships and merchant ships set sail for this purpose. They had a total capacity of 87000 men. This was more than enough to save the nearly 50000 men still on the peninsula on May 10. However, due to a storm with wind force 8, many convoys had to turn back, so that the last embarkation was postponed until the following night from May 11 to 12. Full of desperation, the 17th Army held the Khersones position for another day to allow for the rescue of everyone by sea. The following night, however, almost no ships arrived to the evacuation points in the Crimea. Desperate shouts from the combat troops always yielded the same result: no ships at the landing sites. Yet, once again, there were enough ships. The evacuation fleet was out in the roads of the Crimea, but it did not reach the coast. The disaster for the last German soldiers in the Crimea happened after the Crimean naval commander, Rear Admiral Schulz, on board the leader boat of the first flotilla of fast boats, started to order his flotilla to the loading points. Schulz wanted to steer the convoys to the berths himself. Curiously, his command apparatus by radio had broken down; the frequencies of the single radio line were jammed, making it impossible to issue orders to the individual ships of the evacuation fleet. The Rear Admiral then sent a radio message to all ships, instructing them to sail as close as possible to the exit of Kamyshevaya Bay. But this radio order, given to headquarters by the admiral himself, never arrived. It either was not sent, or disappeared, or got lost in "some other way". The culprits were never found. Rear Admiral Schulz then endeavored to use his own boat to find individual transporters and direct them to landing sites. Most of them, however, he did not find. They returned empty to Constanza at daybreak, leaving the soldiers on the peninsula to their fate. Because of the absolute Soviet air superiority since the end of April 1944 after the withdrawal of the last German fighter planes from the Crimea, a transport of the soldiers back to Constanza was impossible. sion of the peninsula, a daytime evacuation by sea was like a suicide mission. Only a few courageous commanders of sieve ferries and landing craft tried successfully to reach the landing sites in the Crimea on their own initiative - and usually got back safely. It has never been investigated until today who was personally responsible for the fact that the possible evacuation of the last German and Romanian soldiers from the Crimean peninsula by sea failed. The reasons lie in human error, cowardice or sabotage. Thus, the catastrophe in the Crimea resembled a small Stalingrad. In the end, during the battle in Crimea, 78000 German and Romanian soldiers remained on the peninsula as prisoners or dead. Huge amounts of material fell into the hands of the Russians. Politically the worst was that the Romanian forces in the Crimea had lost several divisions >in one Kessel for the second time after Stalingrad. This political setback for Marshal

Antonescu was to greatly strengthen (as desired?) the subversive forces in Romania. Was a tragic miscalculation hiding behind the alleged sabotage of the German defense of the Crimea? It was indeed expected that without the chrome from Turkey, Germany would not have been able to wage war within a short period of time. Didn't this conviction, which was also circulating in German army armament circles, seem worth every >peasant sacrifice< in order to let the hated regime perish? Unfortunately, there is little hope that documents confirming this will ever be published, for too many questions would have been raised. Shortly before the certain fall of the Crimea, Turkey declared on April 20, 1944, that it was not a neutral but an Allied state and would stop chrome ore shipments to Germany. After cutting off Germany's only chrome supply, the time fuse bomb ticked for German warfare. However, the Wehrmacht Joint Staff calculated that chrome supplies, essential for armaments, would last for another 18 months.¹ But this was far longer than originally feared or hoped for by opponents of German warfare at the Wehrmacht Joint Staff. After the fall of the Crimea, therefore, the war would have been over for Germany by September 1945 at the latest. B) The Summer Catastrophe in Belarus: Oddities in the in the Greatest German Defeat of All Time Was the Soviet Union dependent on the success of "Operation Bagration"? In the summer of 1944, the Red Army wanted to achieve with "Operation Bagration" a goal that it had failed to achieve every time in the previous months and years: the destruction of the "Army Group Center". For this large-scale operation, the Soviets had mustered a third of their field strength. 2 331700 Red Army troops were waiting for their revenge for "Barbarossa." Although the steady retreats of the post-Kursk era had hollowed out the German Ostheer, the formidable Red Army had by then failed to inflict the same catastrophic defeats on the Wehrmacht as it had itself endured under the blows of German troops in 1941-42. Instead, the Wehrmacht was still deep in Soviet territory, far from the pre-war borders of the Soviet Union. From the front line, it was still much closer to Moscow than to Berlin! Despite major gains in terrain, the Red Army had constantly taken terrible losses on the battlefield. While it was possible to compensate somewhat for personnel losses by immediately drafting the male population of the recaptured areas, it was increasingly dependent on Western Allied aid to ensure the Red Army's technical mobility. If, in the summer of 1944, Germany had succeeded in pinning down the Western Allies in their beachhead at Normandy or even driving them back to England, the Red Army would have had a major problem. Stalin would then have quickly faced a reinforced German army with armored reserves transferred from the West to the Eastern Front - made worse by terrain well suited for defense. The Russian planners then also waited calmly to launch their offensive until it became clear that the Normandy invasion by the Western Allies was not a failure. A lightning transfer of powerful German troops from West to East was no longer to be expected, Marshal Zhukov could start rolling. A success of >Operation Bagration< thus represented a necessity for the Red Army if it wanted to give a decisive turn to the war against Germany. Otherwise, a draw would have been in the cards again! The Russian situation was also not made easier by the fact that the well-established secret intelligence channels from Switzerland were quite disturbed at that time. Whether by chance or not, Stalin's planned summer offensive now received decisive backing from conspicuous blunders by high-ranking German officers. "A quiet summer is to be expected..." informed the chief of military intelligence in the East (FHO), General Gehlen, of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< just a few weeks before the major Soviet attack. This conclusion is probably one of the most momentous "errors< of the entire war. The German High Command then also expected the main Soviet attack to come from the south, from the Ukraine. If ever enemy reconnaissance played a decisive role during the Eastern campaign, it was in the early summer of 1944, immediately before the start of the major Soviet offensive. One of the lessons of the Eastern campaign so far was that an enemy breakthrough through the main battle line did not necessarily mean disaster. After all, it was a basic military rule to keep an operational reserve behind the front lines ready to respond. But in the summer of 1944, of all times,

>Heeresgruppe Mitte< lacked such a reserve. It had been withdrawn to another army group - only shortly before the Russian attack. In May 1944, the decision had been made in Moscow in favor of an attack on "Heeresgruppe Mitte<. Since the Soviets knew that the success of their operation depended on convincing the enemy that the focus of the attack was planned elsewhere, at first only five men knew of the entire plan of "Operation Bagration. These were Zhukov, Vasilevsky, Antonov, Shtemenko, and one of the deputy chiefs of the operational administration. Any contact between them by letter, telephone or telegraph was forbidden. Reports from the front were handled only by two or three people who reported in person. Otherwise, no one learned more than he had to know because of his function. An exact date was not set until the final preparation phase. The deception was so extensive that in May the front commanders were ordered to switch to defense on the outside and give the impression that the Red Army was digging in to consolidate after almost nine months of fighting. An absolute radio silence was also imposed. A fictitious army was >stationed< in the south of the Eastern Front, similar to the phantom army of the Western Allies in England. The transition to defense was clearly emphasized in the press and in the troops' political lessons. In fact, however, the success of Soviet deceptive maneuvers depended not

only on the skills of their planners but also on the willingness of the enemy to be hoodwinked. In fact, what later became probably the most successful action of Soviet warfare did not go unnoticed at all. Nevertheless, the German side succeeded in recognizing the camouflaged deployment not only in essence, but in detail. According to information from German enemy reconnaissance, an offensive plan was said to have been discussed under Stalin's chairmanship as early as between March 24 and March 30, 1944, under the slogan: "All roads lead to Rome, but the road to Berlin leads through Warsaw." This information from a "generally reliable source" of April 27 (German agent in Stalin's entourage?) was not heeded. That a major Red Army summer operation would break out sooner or later had been almost an open secret among the German leadership since May 1944. Even Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, who had been informed at second hand, was already expecting at that time an "enormous Soviet offensive, which will probably be synchronized with the invasion planned by the British and Americans." The reconnaissance conducted by the troops in the great front arc of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, especially in the course of May and June, suggested more and more clearly a Soviet troop buildup of the greatest magnitude. Clearly recognizable centers of gravity were formed around Vitebsk and Parichi. At the Heeresgruppe and the Army High Command, however, did not believe the increasingly clear and complete results of troop reconnaissance (frontline and aerial observation, radio reconnaissance, interrogations of defectors and V-man intelligence). Instead, more and more troops and heavy weapons were withdrawn from the central front and moved to the supposedly endangered area around Kovel. Nevertheless, by May Hitler had begun to suspect that Stalin was now going to attack the >Heeresgruppe Mitte< with all his forces. The harbingers of the storm, which reached him from the front, bypassing the official channels, confirmed this suspicion. But throughout the month of May, Gehlen's "Foreign Armies East" division had wanted to discover the main Soviet center of gravity further into the space in front of "Army Group North Ukraine<. Even when it was reported to Gehlen that Russian reinforcements were being moved from the Kovel area to the area of "Army Group Center<, the intelligence general would go no further on June 13, 1944, than to declare that the Red Army might launch an entrapment attack. Gehlen "forgot to mention the 6th Russian Guard Army in the Baltic Front area, which was later to play a major role in the push to Vitebsk. Yet, on the ground, the 3rd, 4th, and 9th Armies in particular possessed complete and clear knowledge of the major event that was about to take place in their area. The high command of the German 9th Army expressed itself dramatically and announced on June 17, 1944: "The situation in front of the army has changed fundamentally in a short time; with the enemy's force structure near the front remaining unchanged, a

large-scale deployment is taking place in depth in front of the entire army front." The first signs had already been recognized on June 3; the Soviet reinforcements brought in by June 15 were estimated at 10 to 15 divisions and two armored corps. It was determined that the center of gravity of the enemy offensive would undoubtedly be in the area of "Army Group Center." The 4th Army also had a good overview. Thus, on 16 June, the Ic of the 4th Army reported the detection of 200 enemy batteries on the highway and 120 batteries in front of the 39th Panzer Corps. It was reported that the buildup of strong enemy forces in front of the center of the army had been completed since 20 June and that with the beginning of the offensive could now be expected to begin on 22 June. This is exactly how it should be!

The 9th Army learned on June 18 that Marshal Zhukov had visited the troops in the trench in front of its left wing. The Army recalled a London Radio report from early June that the Soviet objective would bring a surprise by deferring the Lemberg objective in favor of retaking Belarus. In fact, Marshal Zhukov mentioned in his memoirs that he had visited the assault armies and troops in the trenches in turn beginning on June 6. On June 19, in view of the enemy buildup, the 9th Army commander-in-chief demanded reinforcements beyond the Army Group Reserve (20th PZ.Div. and 707 Inf.Div.) to successfully fight the coming defensive battle. Nothing came of it! Then on 21 June it was reported to the top that the enemy was ready to attack in front of the 9th Army and that the attack could be expected to begin on 22 June. The direction of the main attack was also precisely indicated. As late as 20 June, in fact, the efficient French infantry regiment 638, deployed in the area of the German 4th Army, was transferred to France, although Army High Command 9 pointed out that the regiment had fully proved itself and would be difficult to dispense with. Out of the role fell the 2nd Army (Chief of General Staff Henning von Tresckow). In contrast to the other armies, it took the view that an attack was to be expected in the near future at "Army Group Northern Ukraine". This erroneous assessment of the situation was maintained by the 2nd Army even after the beginning of "Operation Bagration". Further below it will have to be clarified whether only coincidence was at work here. It is interesting to see how it was with the assessment of the Soviet airborne deployment. Before any offensive, it was an unmistakable feature when air forces were massed in the area of the expected attack sector. As early as the beginning of June 1944, a Russian U-2 biplane was shot down in the battle space of the Silesian 252nd Infantry Division. In it sat a firmly uninjured Soviet major from the staff of an air division. In his briefcase were found handwritten documents of the 3rd Air Army, from which far-reaching conclusions about the impending offensive could be drawn. The division commander, Lieutenant General Melzer, immediately passed on the documents to the 9th Corps. The major, a cipher officer, also testified that three Soviet fighter corps had arrived in the Smolensk area. More than 4500 Soviet aviators, nearly half of the Red Air Force's 11000 aircraft inventory, were now standing by in front of the "Army Group Center" area. Since, after all, the mass of the Soviet air force, 6900 planes, was still suspected by the intelligence service to be in the southern area, the air force did not want to give empty information about suspected centers of attack. What is clear is that of the "Army Groups Center" or "North Ukraine" that came into question for a coming Soviet attack, only the "Army Group Center" possessed clear indications of an almost completed enemy buildup. Sufficient intelligence was available at least eight days before the start of the major Soviet offensive, and there would also have been time to react to the danger. Only the 20th Panzer Division, which was considered to have little combat power at the time, was transferred from the area of "Army Group North Ukraine" to "Army Group Center" on 14 June 1944. This division alone would have brought "Bagration" into the greatest trouble by a hair's breadth. Especially the troop concentrations in the flanks of the so-called "White Russian Arc" near Vitebsk and Bobruisk, the later main breakthrough sections of the Red Army, was flawlessly recognized. This incredibly clear picture of the situation, according to the former commanding general of the 4th

Army, shows that the German reconnaissance services had done their job successfully: "It was a picture of the enemy of unusual clarity, which, in the diversity of observations, left no more room for the assumption that it could be a sham march or a misdirection." Nevertheless, it is an unbelievable process why the High Command of the "Army Group Center" downplayed the enlightened Russian threat. This also gave backing to the forces representing an alleged "Northern Ukraine solution" in the OKH and to the Chief of Operations, General Heusinger, as well as to Chief of Staff General Zeitzler. Even the deployment of the 240,000 Russian partisans, who on the night of June 20, 1944, largely paralyzed rail traffic between the Dnieper and the Berezina in the area of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" and cut off telephone traffic, was apparently not reported to the Führer's headquarters. In the War Diary book of the German Wehrmacht, there is no record that such a message was ever passed on. Heinz-Georg Lemm recalled that during his time in Russia he had rarely experienced that all signs pointed so clearly to an imminent attack. The mood in the officer corps had been a mixture of resignation and despair, because the reports from the front were apparently thrown to the wind by the higher command staffs. Even when the OKH had been supplied with indications that the 5th Guards Tank Army had been established ahead of "Heeresgruppe Mitte", the report "found no real credence," and the OKH under Zeitzler and Heusinger continued to accept all six Soviet tank armies in the southern section. The question arises whether significant parts of the leadership of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" as well as the OKH (Army High Command) were unable - or unwilling - to recognize and react to the tremendous changes in front of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" front. The commander-in-chief of "Heeresgruppe Mitte", General Field Marshal Busch, was helpless in the face of this obvious error of judgment. "What am I to do?" Busch had asked his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Krebs, over and over again in his headquarters in Minsk, shrugging his shoulders. He was alluding to his inability to overturn Zeitzler's and Heusinger's obviously wrong assessment of the situation. On 22 June 1944, the "quiet summer" predicted

by General Gehlen in the area of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" came to an abrupt end. On a frontal section 700 km wide, 2.5 million Soviet soldiers entered, fired 45,000 guns, rolled 6,100 tanks and I. What is hidden from us until today - 1944

assault guns, some 4,500 aircraft attacked the "Heeresgruppe Mitte", which had been abandoned by the OKH and parts of the Heeresgruppen leadership. In fact, at the beginning of "Operation Bagration", the Soviets were unable to achieve tactical surprise at any single point. After all, the centers of attack had been correctly anticipated by the armies' IC divisions. Now, too, it would have been a matter of moving the available tanks and artillery reserves as well as air units to the threatened section of the front as quickly as possible. Supported by false downplaying statements of leading officers of the 2nd and 4th Army, the OKH under Zeitzler and Heusinger as well as the Abteilung "Fremde Heere Ost" continued to insist on their erroneous assessment of the situation even several days after the beginning of the Soviet offensive. The biggest Soviet offensive of the Second World War was only called a "sham attack". Even the war diary of the "Army Group Center" recorded no indication of more serious concerns about the course of the Army Group's defensive operation as late as June 22. Already one day later the front of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" northwest and southwest of Vitebsk was torn apart. When then General Field Marshal Busch let the Army High Command know at 2:45 p.m. that the situation with the 3rd Panzer Army could no longer be restored by its own forces, the unbelievable question of the Chief of the Operations Department of the OKH, General Heusinger, followed, to which reasons this development was due. Did he really not know better, or were there other motives behind it? The opportunity to act would have arisen as late as 24 June 1944. In fact, on June 24, the 3rd, 9th and 4th Armies of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" were still far away from a complete defeat, as it was about to happen.

On that day, >Heeresgruppe Mitte< considered it possible that the enemy was mainly attacking its three eastern armies, because >Heeresgruppe Nordukraine* was still quiet. On the other hand, according to the opinion of the >Heeresgruppe Mitte*, nine tenths of the enemy's armored units were in the south. Even now, the high command of "Army Group Center" as well as the OKH were not prepared to act decisively in order to save the soldiers of "Army Group Center" who were in the greatest danger. Not even from the non-attacked 2nd Army of "Heeresgruppe Mitte* reinforcements were thrown to the other endangered sectors of the Army Group. Full of despair in view of the impending unnecessary doom, the 9th Army had the following entered in its war diary on June 25, 1944: "The AOK (Army High Command 9) can accept all these orders, of whose disastrous consequences it is fully aware, only with that obedience with which the troop leader, after responsibly presenting his opposing view, has to carry out the orders of his superiors, even if they contradict his conviction." Four days later, the 9th Army had gone down as a major force. The puzzling withdrawal of the armored reserves. On May 29, 1944, the OKH ordered the transfer of the LVI Panzer Corps from "Heeresgruppe Mitte* to "Heeresgruppe Nordukraine*. Even a letter of protest from "Heeresgruppe Mitte* on the same day to General Heusinger, Chief of the General Staff of the OKH, did not bring about any change. Heusinger had his reasons, as we will see later! Thus, "Heeresgruppe Mitte* lost 88 percent of its tanks, 23 percent of its assault guns and 50 percent of its "Rhinos* (tank destroyers with 8.8 cm PAK). When the Soviet attack began on 22 June 1944, "Heeresgruppe Mitte* had only one heavy tank battalion, the heavy tank battalion 501 with "Tigers*. The OKH did not hesitate to send four heavy "Tiger" tank battalions, the battalions 505, 506, 507 and 509 to the "Army Group Northern Ukraine*. At the beginning of June the heavy Panzerbataillon 501 even had to give up nine of its >Tigers< to Panzerbataillon 509 at >Heeresgruppe Nordukraine*. This left Panzer Battalion 501 with only 20 >Tigers<.1 The disastrous withdrawal of tank reserves from >Heeresgruppe Mitte* only a few weeks before the start of the major Russian attack deprived this army group of any possibility of shifting its center of gravity in the event of an attack. Today, however, >modern< historians like to claim that even without the withdrawal of the panzer reserves, a Russian victory in the area of >Heeresgruppe Mitte* was inevitable. The effective use of the 20th Panzer Division as the sole Army Group reserve, as well as the devastation wrought among the Russian attackers by the combat vehicles of the 5th Panzer Division, which arrived long after the major Russian offensive had begun, speak otherwise.2 The successes achieved by the heavy tank battalion 501 with only 20 "Tigers* in the Orsha area, as well as the firing figures of the heavy tank battalions 505 and 507, which were transferred to the Army Group much too late after all, are also more than revealing: all three units lost a relatively small number of "Tigers*, mostly because they could not be recovered. All three "Tiger* battalions were temporarily and locally successful in bringing the Soviet advance to a halt. Even "Stalin* tanks and SU-152 assault guns (with 15.2 cm cannons) could not get past the "Tigers* lying like rocks in the surf. The heavy tank battalions 505 and 507 eventually retreated only to avoid imminent encirclement after their rearward communications were cut off or threatened. Even in the desperate days of the Soviet breakthrough, the "Tigers* were still able to achieve a kill ratio of 6.1:1 against incredible overwhelming odds. Thus it is clear that the responsible gentlemen in the OKH, especially General Heusinger, did the Red Army a great service by withdrawing the tank reserves of "Heeresgruppe Mitte* shortly before the start of the major offensive. False reports, lies and leadership chaos at the "Army Group Center< Despite all advance warnings, the war diary of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< recorded the following message on June 22, 1944: "The major attack northwest of Vitebsk means a complete surprise for the German leadership, since according to the previous enemy picture, such a strong massing (6-7 divisions) was not assumed here." Although the Army Group had reported the start of the Russian offensive to the OKH (Army High Command) at 8:15 a.m. that same day, the war diary that same day recorded no evidence of more

serious concern about the conduct of the Army Group's defensive operation.^{1,2} The German leadership is widely accused today of having been partly to blame for the demise of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" through its late actions and orders. The main blame for the dilemma, however, is probably to be found among high officers of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" itself. For example, on the evening of June 24, the Chief of the General Staff of the 4th Army, General Schulze-Büttger, reported that the Russian lacked momentum. According to overheard radio messages, the latter was amazed at the strong German defenses. He had become bogged down in the area of the 337th Infantry Division and was leading forces from Tschaussy to the north. This, he said, was a sign that he urgently needed forces in the breach at the 337th Infantry Division. This downplaying of Schulze-Büttger took place on June 24, 1944, which became the fateful day of "Heeresgruppe Mitte". On this day it would still have been possible to avert the catastrophe and to withdraw in time the front-line units threatened with encirclement and annihilation. Instead of decisive reports and orders, however, chaos, lies and trickery prevailed at the Army Group. A statement in the 4th Army's June 25 war diary shows what this was all about: "Caution required in upward conversations." On the same day, "Army Group Center" and the armies attempted to weaken the front arc southeastward of Bobruisk to the point that the formations there would be deliberately pushed back soon. An unbelievable operation. Strangely enough, the war diary of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" for the decisive days of 25, 26 and 27 June 1944 has disappeared. The fact is that on June 26, 1944, in the evening, Hitler had authorized the gradual disengagement of the 4th Army onto the Berezina River and an evasion of the 9th Army onto the Bobruisk bridgehead position. While the 9th Army was already lost, much could have been done with the 4th Army. Although Hitler's authorization of 26 June was known to "Heeresgruppe Mitte", at 11:45 a.m. on 27 June the IC of the Army Group delivered the order to the 4th Army: "Hold the Dnieper position." It was known that the Soviets south of Orscha had already bypassed the Dnieper position by a wide margin and had also crossed the river at three points north of Mogilev. The Army Group order was therefore impossible to carry out. For what reason "Heeresgruppe Mitte" did not exhaust the possibility opened by Hitler to save the 4th Army is still unknown today and gives rise to questions. What was behind the sudden breakdown of all of all communications? Probably the last chance after the "surprising" start of the Russian major offensive in the central section would have been a quick German reaction. In fact, the Wehrmacht had managed this time and again with the precision of clockwork in the course of the Eastern Front so far. Already in the first days after the outbreak of "Operation Bagration", all three German armies and corps as well as the leadership of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had become almost helpless on the outside. The lack of almost any communications down to the divisions had a particularly dramatic effect.¹ There were some striking developments here. Contributing factors were certainly the massive artillery bombardment and the continuous bombing raids, which destroyed telephone lines and numerous radio sets. In the rear of the army group, partisans destroyed cables and turnstile relays. New connections could hardly be established in the haste of the retreat fighting. Long-distance radio communications, which had previously functioned satisfactorily for years, were reportedly completely disrupted by Russian transmitters. The motorcycle messengers, who were used to a greater extent as replacements, were usually only able to reach their destinations on their heavy motorcycles by long detours, i.e. much too late or not at all. The same happened to the ordinance officers sent out. As a substitute, general staff officers and commanders tried to transmit orders in "Fieseler Fi-156 Storch" liaison planes or to lead them directly. Delays, as well as the danger of being shot down by superior enemy airpower and ground defenses, were ever-present. However, vital command transmissions and reporting channels, a prerequisite for tight command and control, were no longer possible not only in the critical situation after the start of the major Russian offensive, but already from June 20, 1944 – two days before the Red Army arrived!

Thus, each corps, each division had to fight on its own, without connection to the other units, dependent on itself, making decisions without having reliable knowledge about its own and enemy force relationships in its nearer or wider surroundings. Even OKH and Führerhauptquartier hardly learned what was really going on at the front, and had to rely on "interpretations" of the army high commands, which were located far away from the battlefield. That this had to have dire consequences was obvious. What is striking about this sudden and complete breakdown of intelligence links is that they had previously functioned without any problems for years, even in extremely critical situations (such as Stalingrad). General Albert Praun, later successor of the resistance general Fellgiebel as chief of army intelligence, reported that even before the offensive the intelligence conditions in "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had been very conspicuous.¹ He recorded negligence everywhere during his control missions. The large rear intelligence exchanges had not been secured against bombs and shelling, although the front was clearly approaching. When he sent Colonel Dr. Merkel, commander of the Führungsnachrichtenregiment 597, to Bialystok to reconnoiter conditions there, Merkel found that the exchange there was manned by the Ersatzheer. Not only were his suggestions for improving conditions rejected, but disputes over authority but disputes over authority developed between the responsible radio intelligence leadership and the AGN (Amtgruppe Nachrichtenwesen beim Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres und Chef der Heeresrüstung). There sat some gentlemen whose interests did not concern the victory of the German Wehrmacht. Nor is it convincing that the long-distance radio traffic of an entire army group should have been completely disrupted by Russian transmitters for many days. An artificial shutdown of the crucial connections would have been just as sufficient.¹ This was more than mere coincidence. In this connection, Major General Albert Praun reported how in October 1943 he was ordered to become an intelligence officer with Field Marshal von Kluge, then commander-in-chief of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<. While passing through the Führer's headquarters, General Fellgiebel showed him, by way of introduction, a long teletype about poor telephone communications at >Heeresgruppe Mitte<. According to Fellgiebel, the only remedy could be Colonel Hassel, whom he offered to send. Under Fellgiebel, Colonel Kurt von Hassel was Chief of the Intelligence Branch at the Commander of the Reserve Army and Chief of Army Armament. On Praun's return to Minsk, Field Marshal Busch complained to him about the frequently disrupted intelligence links and told him that he had requested Colonel Hassel to remedy the situation. Praun wrote, however, that he had not made use of this request on his part. Hassel was only temporarily deputy intelligence commander of the 16th Army in the summer of 1943 and had little experience other than the simple conditions in the 16th Army. Something else must have been at stake here. Praun's staff under Colonel Häuser worked well. Nevertheless, working conditions remained extremely unpleasant. Also, Praun discovered that Field Marshal Busch's initially justified complaints about communications were due to the fact that "overzealous leaders of the intelligence services" had connected many listeners (!) in parallel to the Field Marshal's apparatus, thus worsening communications. This, according to Praun, was remedied. Although the influence of the Reserve Army under the newly created Chief of the Intelligence Group seemed so eliminated, Praun had to discover that in Bialystok the exchange was again manned by the Reserve Army - throwing sand into the gears. As we shall see later, the role of the Ersatzheer was no accident! Praun did not see himself in a position to tackle this spider's web of intrigues combined with poor functioning. When the four commanders-in-chief of the armies and their chiefs of staff met for a meeting in Minsk in the spring of 1944, he had had enough. Since the chief of staff and Hitler's chief adjutant, Lieutenant General Schmudt, also attended the meeting, Praun asked that he be given command of a front-line division again. Such a voluntary report to the infantry was surely an act of desperation, and Praun wrote that "incidents unknown to the infantryman at the front" made him increasingly uncomfortable with the post. In the same position as he had been, he wrote, was the Army

Group's engineer commander, Lieutenant General Lüdecke. Lüdecke was later killed in "Operation Bagration. Colonel Kurt von Hassel, whose transfer to "Heeresgruppe Mitte" Praun, planned by Fellgiebel, had successfully prevented, had the task on July 20, 1944, of leading radio specialists who were to help the conspirators gain control of the German intelligence network. Thus, he was the "communications chief" of the conspiracy. When General Praun left for Germany on March 1, 1944, to take over a division in France, he attempted to report by telephone to General Fellgiebel at the Führer's headquarters in Berchtesgaden. In doing so, he only reached his chief of staff, Colonel Hahn. Hahn cynically said, "Be careful, they want to hang generals now who do something wrong!" The collapse of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" during the Russian summer offensive was then also a consequence of the failing intelligence links. Full of despair, one day later in the 4th Army's war diary, next to the official words "fighting to gain time," was the handwritten remark: "Why actually?" Instead, the army should and could have seized with the greatest speed the opportunity opened to it by Hitler to retreat from the danger of encirclement. The fact that there was an obvious failure of leadership in the 4th Army was also written by Marshal Zhukov in his Memories and Thoughts. and Thoughts: "The encirclement of the entire German 4th Army is ripening . . . At that time, when we observed and analyzed the conduct of the German troops and their high command in this operation, we frankly wondered a little at its gross errors, which conjured up a disastrous outcome for the German troops. Instead of a rapid retreat to rear lines of sight and the employment of strong covering groups on the flanks threatened by the Soviet thrust forces, the German troops became embroiled in protracted frontal battles east and northeast of Minsk." In the face of these unforgivable mistakes, Hitler sought a culprit, and in place of the completely overstretched Generalfeldmarschall Busch, Generalfeldmarschall Model assumed command of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" on June 28, 1944. He now had the task of closing the nearly 400-km-wide frontal gap at "Heeresgruppe Mitte". Shortly after taking command, Field Marshal Model had doubts as to whether "Heeresgruppe Mitte's" command had even recognized the extent of the intensification of the situation that had occurred in the meantime. General Heusinger, however, confirmed to him that he had truthfully described the situation to Hitler. Words are only smoke and mirrors! In fact, June 25, 1944, had already brought the avoidable leadership bankruptcy of "Heeresgruppe Mitte". On that day, the downfall of the 4th and 9th Armies had irrevocably begun. Where were the tank reconnaissance units? Was there any method in the ignorance claimed to the outside world, right up to army group and army leadership in White Russia? After the Soviet breakthroughs through the front of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" with subsequent war of movement, the great hour of German tank reconnaissance would have come. The German tank reconnaissance divisions were the main carriers of operational, tactical as well as combat reconnaissance, which had proven themselves for years. Especially with the uncertainty after the beginning of "Operation Bagration" about the advance of the Soviet armored troops, their marching columns as well as the supply transports, it would have been of decisive importance for the German leadership whether the terrain in front of or behind the then still fighting German formations was actually free of enemies and how the enemy troops were distributed. It would have been important not to lose touch with the enemy here, to recognize details of his behavior, strength, composition and also combat value. The German tank reconnaissance troops had already achieved great things here during the course of the war so far. Now they would have had ideal operational opportunities - but they did not come! In fact, the tank reconnaissance detachments of the German armored divisions were completely missing, especially in the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" in the summer of 1944, because they were "re-equipped", all at the same time, not one after the other and even at that time. There must have been very good reasons for this! When they joined their parent divisions later in the offensive, there were still plenty of gaps in the front and operational opportunities that they could have usefully reconnoitered.

Curiously, however, they were now almost always misused for defensive purposes "for lack of combat troops" – and taken away from their divisions again.¹ Without heavy armament and with thin armor, they naturally could not achieve much here and suffered heaviest losses. Thus it came about that the deployment of the few German armored divisions in the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" showed great operational importance, even almost strategic effects, but due to the lack of exact knowledge of the enemy situation was exhausted in very limited defense, short counterattacks and evasion under renewed advance. Despite all this, the German armored counterattacks were usually very successful, but then almost always had to be broken off when they encountered stronger, surprising enemy without their ancestral armored reconnaissance vehicles. The drama of the 9th Army: Why was the Heeresgruppen-reserve held back? At the 9th Army's junction with the 4th Army adjoining to the north, Red Army troops had broken deep through a treacherous bog on June 24, 1944, after a daring attack by the Don Tank Corps over a stub embankment. Against the looming Russian breakthrough toward the Mogilev-Bobruisk runway, the 20th Armored Division would now have been the obvious choice. It stood exceptionally well in reserve near Bobruisk.¹⁻³ Apart from the 20th Panzer Division, the entire "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had only two other tank divisions and a few assault gun units. But of these, more than a third were "accidentally" in the wrong place, namely on the front of the 2nd Army (Chief of Staff Henning von Tresckow). It was not attacked at all. Although "Operation Bagration" had been underway in the north since June 22, the 20th Panzer Division was ordered to be ready to march only on June 23, 4 a.m., after midnight aerial photography had established with certainty 200 Russian batteries south of the Berezina. But then something incredible happened!

Eastward of the Berezina Bridge at Bobruisk, the reinforced 2nd Division of Panzer Regiment 21 of the 20th Panzer Division lay ready in an excellent position. It could be used against both a northern and a southern thrust by the Russians. With about a hundred Panzer IVs, the division was well equipped, but it did not get a command. For an entire day, the commander-in-chief of the 9th Army, General Jordan, forgot to even give the 20th Panzer Division a deployment order. Its commander, Major Paul Schulze, then of his own accord ordered three of his companies to drive toward the tank attack of the 48th Soviet Army, which was advancing north of Bobruisk. Schulze brought it to a halt! When a tank corps of the 3rd Soviet Army broke through further north at the junction with the 4th Army, Schulze left one company with about 20 Panzer IVs as an intervention reserve, deployed his remaining tanks again, and drove into the flank of the Russians who had broken through. No sooner had Schulze begun his attack than a counter-order came from Army High Command 9: Deployment south of Bobruisk! Schulze's tanks were taken out of the ongoing attack at night and turned south. Their successful operation in the Rogachev area was thus cut short. The infantry in the trenches could hardly grasp what was happening. Incredibly, the 20th Armored Division now had to undertake a 90-km overland march in tracked vehicles. From experience, some of the tanks would fail along the way. While the 20th Panzer Division had to roll so idly and nonsensically from north to south, the Russians also smashed and overran the German infantry positions near Rogachev that had just been secured by the tanks. During their march to the south, the tanks were met only by fleeing units, because the front they were supposed to secure had already dissolved. The counterattack by the 20th Panzer Division, however, initially went well. The Panzer IVs smashed Russian incursions and shot down 60 Russian tanks. Behind them, however, villages were already burning because the Red Army had broken through to the northwest and now threatened the rear of Panzerkampfgruppe Schulze. In the end, the 20th Panzer Division thus arrived too late to plug the hole south of Bobruisk, while failing to prevent the Russian breakthrough in the north. Its effort, however, showed what a single strong armored unit under determined leadership could accomplish even in the summer of 1944. It was striking that the leadership of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" also apparently agreed with the retention of the 20th Panzer Division by the

9th Army.^{1,2} It is a fact that the 9th Army's hesitant attitude, by squandering its armored reserve, cost >Heeresgruppe Mitte* its first decisive defeat. General Jordan, commanding general of the 9th Army, later lost his post because of the drama surrounding the 20th Panzer Division. The avoidable fiasco in the deployment of the 20th Panzer Division led to disaster on the morning of June 28. The mass of the 9th Army was trapped on the east bank of the Berezina River around Bobruisk. The Red Army's task was made easier by the fact that Army Group Command and 9th Army weakened the frontal arc southeast of Bobruisk to such an extent that the troops there were to be deliberately (!) pushed back soon. This leadership behavior of the >Heeresgruppe Mitte*, which looked completely like the >Generaloberst BECK retreat principle<, had to lead irrevocably to the downfall of the "Creme de la Creme*" of the German Eastern Army in Belorussia! On June 29, 1944 the "Feste Platz*" Bobruisk fell to the Russians. At that time the "Heeresgruppe Mitte*" had already lost 130 000 men, 60000 Germans went into captivity. In a last futile attempt to open the wooden road bridge at Bobruisk for the trapped comrades, the mass of armored parts of the 20th Panzer Division perished in the attack of Soviet planes. According to Russian data, 526 planes, including 400 bombers, attacked the breakout forces between 7:15 p.m. and 9 p.m. It was probably among the first times since the Battle of Moscow in 1941, that the Russian air force destroyed a German tank attack from the air alone! Every fresh division would have mattered. The importance of the lack of German reserves for the success of >Operation Bagration< The lack of reserves made itself felt quickly after the start of >Operation Bagration. By the evening of 23 June 1944, the Russians had already advanced 18 km deep in a 20 km wide strip and were only 2 km from the Dvina River. The 3rd Panzer Army had long since deployed all its reserves. Except for training and weak security units, there was nothing left. Around noon on June 24, Field Marshal Busch requested at least two new divisions to restore a cohesive front. However, there were supposedly none in Germany. What a lie! All the German High Command could scrape together were two weakened infantry divisions already battered in hard fighting elsewhere on the Eastern Front, two Sicherungsdivisionen with limited combat capabilities, and a single Panzer Division.^{1,2} These few weak units were now to hold off two Soviet armored armies. Ten fresh divisions in the first three days would have turned the tide here! But they stayed at home in their barracks and had to follow senseless marching orders to the Allgäu and the Swabian Alb.³ It came as it had to come. By the evening of June 24, the gap in the 3rd Panzer Army's front was already 30 kilometers wide, and no forces were available to close it. This breakthrough was to become one of the main reasons for the destruction of "Heeresgruppe Mitte<, as the Soviet armored columns were able to roll through here in the following days. Only three fresh German divisions would probably have been enough to close the gap here. One twentieth of the replacement units available in Germany! While three corps of the 4th Army were already facing annihilation on the west bank of the Berezina on July 3, the arrival of the 170th Infantry Division and the 5th Armored Division enabled the remnants of the 4th Army to build a defensive line around Molodechno and delay the Red Army's advance. Had the 4th Army instead received five divisions a week earlier, the Russians would probably have been stopped at the Drut River. How decisive a reinforcement even by only a few fresh forces was became apparent when the arrival of only two new divisions already enabled the Germans to slow the Soviet advance considerably. The 5th Armored Division, as the main reserve of the 4th Army, also reported strange occurrences that severely hampered its operations. For example, a hopeful counterattack on July 5, 1944, could not be carried out because the deployment sites were too far apart and a staging of the division for attack to the south or north could not be accomplished. Particular complaints were made about lack of maintenance. Thus, on the evening of July 5, the division had just 25 operational >Panthers< as well as 25 Panzer IV (long); Major von Beschwitz's >Tiger< Abteilung 505, for its part, could still report 15 operational >Tigers<. The reason for this weakening at a crucial time was that the division's workshop companies had been

held far in the rear at Baranovichy by order of officials in charge at the 4th Panzer Army and were now being supplied only after Lida. According to the division history, the so crucial repair of tanks (after all, the only armored reserve of the 4th Army), as well as the other motor vehicles and equipment, has been seriously affected by this other use of the services.

That the misappropriated use of the vital workshop companies was not accidental becomes clear when the other oddities in the 4th Army area are considered. The 5th Panzer Division would have been dangerous to the Red Army advance, for a Soviet radio message intercepted by the division's radio services on July 6 stated verbatim: "If you encounter the 5th PZ.Div. bypass it!" In just six days, beginning on 27 June 1944, the division and >Tiger< Division had shot down 259 Russian tanks. More could have been accomplished if fuel had not prevented many sorties. There would have been enough fuel, because only a few days later, during the hasty evacuation of Minsk, numerous well-filled German fuel depots went up in flames - or were captured by the Russians. Another oddity that struck the 5th Armored Division was the withdrawal of its reconnaissance division. It sent the 4th Army to the Grodno area. Thus, the division command lacked an overview of the enemy picture on the Yemena, between Grodno and Morkin. On July 13, 1944, the division nevertheless succeeded in clearing a 4-km-deep Russian breach through a pincer-like counterattack by its armored fighting group. In the process, according to division history, an "enemy regiment fighting in German uniforms" was completely routed and the division's own HKL (Hauptkampflinie) fully restored. This thwarted the Russians' plan to capture the only bridge over the Morkin River in a coup d'état. It would be interesting to know whether these opponents of the 5th Panzer Division were >SEYDLITZ soldiers<. This refers to former German prisoners of war and exiles who fought for the Russians. Two days later the 5th Panzer Division had to cross a part of the old East Prussian border to the west for the first time with the Suwalki-Zipfel. In fact, the 5th Panzer Division's effort was decisive for its front section. Despite all the "oddities" described above, the mobile operation between Grodno and Olita succeeded in preventing the expansion of Soviet bridgeheads across the Niemna. Possibly this caused the Soviets to seek other centers of gravity, such as northward opposite the right wing of >Heeresgruppe Nord< and also farther south against the 2nd Army positions. The 5th Armored Division, whose troops and leadership, according to division history, were hostile to the events of July 20, 1944, survived the massive Soviet offensives in the summer of 1944, unlike many other divisions of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<. Supplies also >suddenly dried up<, sometimes with dramatic consequences. For example, on July 24, the 17th Panzer Division attempted to rescue the 900-man garrison of Lublin, which had just been captured by the Soviets. The daring attempt failed at the last moment because the division suddenly ran out of fuel, forcing it to destroy all its tanks on the spot. The holding back of the German reserves must then also be seen in a larger context. This will be presented in more detail below. Forgotten in the Berezina Cauldron: Could the demise of the 4th Army have been easily prevented?

Unlike the 9th Army destroyed at Bobruisk by 29 June 1944, the 4th Army units entering the cauldron near the Berezina were still fully operational and in order. Their divisions rolled westward through narrow, sandy, partly swampy paths like an >Heereswurm< as a marching column with an uncertain destination. General Model issued a radio order to the 4th Army to attempt a rearward breakthrough to the southwest around Minsk, especially since the Army Group Reserve was stored on the southern outskirts of Minsk with fuel and ammunition ready for access. But no Army Group command post had previously provided protection for this Army Group Reserve or the Army ammunition dump at Dukora. Allegedly, >Heeresgruppe Mitte< lacked the necessary knowledge of the situation of the retreating 4th Army as a result of disrupted communications.¹⁻² Minsk, with its large quantities of supplies, fell into the hands of the 5th Guards Tank Army on July 3, 1944, barely defended. On the same day the 4th Army was surrounded by the Red Army. It is a fact that neither the division

commander, the commander-in-chief of the 4th Army General von Tippelskirch, who was outside the cauldron (!), nor the > Army Group Center* had an had an approximately sufficient picture of the situation of the 4th Army. There must have been responsible persons for this, but they understood not to leave any traces for posterity. The supreme command over the 4th Army trapped in the cauldron was handed over to General Müller by General von Tippelskirch on July 1, 1944. Following the example of Valentin Hube, who had crashed under mysterious circumstances in April 1944, Vincenz Müller was to reconnect with his own lines in a wandering encirclement past Minsk. To do this, it would now have depended on the air supply of the 4th Army. But the commander-in-chief of the 4th Army, General von Tippelskirch, who, as I said, was outside the Minsk cauldron, did not manage to provide the units of his army with any air support. Supposedly, this was because the 4th Army radio station had not answered the Army Group's request for the drop location. Even if "suddenly* all radio communications with the 4th Army had been severed, there were the German "close reconnaissance aircraft* of the type Fieseler Fi-156 "Storch*. They could not only fly reconnaissance missions, but drop ordnance officers with maps and instructions. This was done successfully with "Gruppe Lindig< and the 12th Panzer Division, but was completely omitted from the 4th Army. Also, not a single German reconnaissance plane was reportedly available to find the 4th Army's buildup area. Yet there were quite a few FW-189 close reconnaissance aircraft that were not affected by the westward withdrawal. Transport planes ready with supplies did not receive a takeoff order. Possible airdrops on sight did not take place either. Drop tanks and fuel barrels, everything would have been really available! In the meantime, on the night of June 30/July 1, the 4th Army again requested the Army Group to drop rations and fuel hard west of Zhukovets and radioed at 1:35 a.m. that the return of the troops from the Berezino area could be guaranteed only if air supplies were available. Again nothing took place. So the 260th Infantry Division radioed, "Despite bravest stand of troops all in vain, since no supply at Zhukovets either." Someone from the 4th Army added: "Failure of air supply means downfall of the division." Nothing happened! Downright hypocritical and as an attempt at justification in case of The fact that on July 5 Army High Command 4 blindly sent seven pro forma radio messages to its trapped corps on the Berezina to inform them about the situation and the best direction of the breakthrough and to ask for a place to drop supplies seems almost hypocritical and an attempt to justify itself in case of investigations by the OKH. To everyone's surprise, another saying ran in from the kettle: "All attempts to force breakthrough by last resort failed. Corps defend themselves." At about 11 p.m. the same day, AOK 4 gave the order to drop supplies of all kinds at Volma, 25 km east of Minsk. It is unknown whether air supplies were still attempted here. By this time, the 4th Army had already gone down. It is puzzling why the possible supply of the 4th Army was not carried out. This would have enabled the 4th Army to make a successful breakout and would also have enabled it to make appropriate marches. Again and again, according to author Rolf Hinze, the question must be raised why supply assistance was not granted to the 4th Army: "After all, this meant certain death or years of captivity for the members of this army." Yet the German air force had shown only a few weeks earlier that it was capable of such supply missions with perfection. Thus, from March 26, 1944, to April 10, 1944, the 4th Air Fleet had successfully enabled General Hube's 300,000-man 1st Panzer Army, exclusively from the air, by dropping supplies, fuel, and ammunition, to successfully cover a distance of some 86 miles in 15 days of fighting and to gain safe passage to the German front. In the process, approximately 200 to 250 tons of supplies were dropped per day with relatively light losses.¹ Something similar would have been feasible without problems in the case of the 4th Army of the >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, which was numerically weaker than the 1st Panzer Army. Until today it is unknown who was responsible for these obvious shortcomings. It could not have been due to the lack of intelligence and reconnaissance means alone. There must have been a >very special inactivity here, which after all cost 130000 men casualties. Hitler's

demand to supply the 4th Army with large airlifters of the type Me-323 >Giant< of the TG3 was also not fulfilled. The reason was an alleged lack of fuel.¹ For another mission, however, >man< was willing to provide valuable aircraft and fuel: Thus, at an unknown airfield in Poland, more than 50 Ju-52 three-engine transport planes were assembled and reserved to bring 1200 men of the von Boeselager cavalry to Berlin-Tempelhof. The cavalymen, the first unit of the Wehrmacht to be fully equipped with the new assault rifle, were to bring the Reich Security Main Office I and II and the Reich Propaganda Ministry under their control in the event of a successful assassination attempt in Prinz-Albert-Strasse or Wilhelms-platz. The problem was that those responsible did not know when the opportunity for assassination would arise. The organization and time required for this action away from the front, which was fighting for its survival, were probably considerable. Due to the failure of the assassination attempt on July 20, the horsemen who had already been withdrawn from the front were sent back there again, with 14 heavy trucks being hurried march back

to the front immediately fell into the hands of the Russians.^{1,2} The acid test was never necessary to determine whether the six cavalry squadrons designated for "Operation Valkyrie" would have even followed their leaders and fired on their own comrades in Berlin. Except for three leading officers, none of the cavalymen knew about the purpose of the planned troop deployment. In any case, it is certain that the Ju-52 squadron would have been needed in supplying the 4th Army. It is striking that apparently no one involved in the postwar period was willing to name the airfield where more than fifty three-engine transports had to wait idly on the ground during the major Russian offensive. Pretty sure fighter protection was probably also provided – which was bitterly lacking at the front. The trap was already set: How the 12th Armored Division was supposed to "wait" for the 5th Guards Tank Army. In early July 1944, the 12th Panzer Division, badly battered by the fighting so far, received an order from "Heeresgruppe Mitte" to break open the cauldron near Minsk. The division itself was located on the Yemien River and was looking for a bridge crossing in order to be able to cross over to the west bank of the river. For this purpose it began an attack in the direction of Stolpce, which was occupied by the Russians. That at the same time a bridge across the Nyemen had long been in German hands, no one at the Army or Army Group Command had informed the division. After initial small success, the enterprise conducted with such weak and exhausted forces failed. The 12th Armored Division halted the attack, but shortly thereafter learned from a radio message from Vormann's group that a bridge near Jeremichi was in the hands of the 20th Armored Division. The 12th Panzer Division, because of dire supply and supply shortages, barely managed to move as far as the rescuing bridge.^{3,4} On urgent request, therefore, fuel was dropped by air supply at about 6 p.m. on 5 July 1944 and landed by cargo gliders. The last large load gliders of the type Messerschmitt Me-321, which could load 22 tons of supplies per aircraft, were also used. All existing Me-321s were lost in this resupply mission, as they could not be recovered due to the withdrawal of the tank forces. >Occidentally<, however, they had forgotten to include rations and maps in the self-sacrificing supply mission as well. While the supply and rear services of the 12th Armored Division were again able to move mobile to the other side of the river, its armored sections were ordered to hold a bridgehead on the east bank to receive the 9th and 4th Army sections breaking out of the kettles near Minsk. 7000 armored vehicles were on the march! Without a possibility of crossing the Yemien, they would have been at the mercy of the Soviet enemy. In reality, however, no German vehicles were approaching, but the whole 5th Soviet armored guard army! A very thought-provoking >error< of the army group. Again, the responsible commanders did not become known. At the last minute, the German armored division was able to move to the saving river bank. Field Marshal Model later criticized Vormann's group for not leading the 12th Panzer Division tightly enough. Contributing to this may have been the report that, although most of the division's supply and staff vehicles had crossed, numerous valuable tanks and tank destroyer vehicles had

been left behind on the east bank. Even the heavy tractors, which were so important for tank recovery, had been defueled in order to take the lighter staff vehicles with them. Obviously, even in view of all the hardships, some people were more concerned with their own well-being than with maintaining combat strength. While the 12th Panzer Division was able to escape the trap set for it on the eastern bank of the Nile, this was not the case for the 4th Panzer Army. Betrayed and forgotten by the Army Group and Army leadership, its divisions had no significant combat power from 3 July 1944 at the latest. However, a considerable number of rear-attackers managed to make their way from the Minsk area through the fronts to their own lines during the summer. By the end of October 1944, a total of 80 officers and 3800 NCOs and enlisted men of the old 4th Army had arrived. Among them was the commander of the 25th Panzer Grenadier Division, Major General Schürmann, as the only division commander of the 4th Army. His statements showed that he, too, had received only a very slight knowledge of the overall situation in which his 4th Army had found itself from June 24 to July 5, 1944. The testimonies of the rear-attackers impressed many a failure and many inexplicable errors of leadership which would otherwise probably be forgotten today. Again, the impression suggests itself that the downfall of the 4th Panzer Army was consciously accepted, if not promoted, by certain forces on the German side. Decision from the air: Why was the German air force absent over White Russia?

Since the beginning of the Eastern campaign, the German Wehrmacht showed itself capable of repulsing Russian attacks again and again, despite the greatest superiority of the enemy. Dangerous strategic situations could thus almost always be mastered. The situation was completely different in the summer of 1944 in Belarus. A decisive element here was the completely surprising Soviet air superiority. It took on similar proportions as that of the Western Allies over Normandy, except that it took the German soldiers on the Eastern Front completely by surprise.¹ Previously, too, there had been repeated episodes of clear Soviet air superiority there. But this was nothing compared to what took place in "Operation Bagration. 7000 Soviet planes attacked the "Heeresgruppe Mitte". Virtually unmolested by German fighters, the Soviet planes destroyed the carefully constructed German field positions, minefields and bunkers. Their speciality was attacks on the German tanks and assault guns, which until then had been driving carelessly by day. German tanks and assault guns. The Red Air Force played a special role in the destruction of the 4th German Army, where strong artillery positions were used to stop the Soviet tanks in direct fire. Soviet bombers were able to largely eliminate the gun emplacements, which they knew in detail beforehand. Having thus broken the back of the defenses, Soviet aircraft smashed the evasive columns of German rear services as well as the withdrawing valuable heavy artillery. Crucial bridge and river crossings were destroyed in direct hits, and the German columns jammed for hundreds of kilometers now offered an easy target. The panic among the German troops became so great that even the anti-aircraft artillery forgot to fire for fear of Soviet air attacks and their gunners preferred to flee into the trenches. Even hardy units like the 20th and 7th Panzer Divisions, which were not infected by the air raid psychosis, were swept into the maelstrom. Thus the 20th Panzer Division, which only a few days earlier had almost single-handedly stopped "Operation Bagration", went down in massive waves of Soviet air strikes during its attack to liberate the defenders of Bobruisk. In the process, over 6000 motor vehicles, including 150 armored vehicles, were destroyed from the air. The 7th Armored Division lost nearly 50 percent of its vehicles from the air in a counterattack. With minimal German air defenses, the Soviets could even afford to use ancient PO-2 biplanes in closed formations in broad daylight to drop bombs. In fact, the Germans had facilitated Soviet success from the air by "making conspicuous mistakes." For example, according to the commander of the 5th Armored Division, Lieutenant General Anton Detlev von Plato, almost all fighters and fighter planes were moved away from the threatened Central Section shortly before the major Russian attack in June 1944.¹ Ostensibly, they were to stop the Anglo-Americans in Normandy. However, most of the withdrawn

airmen did not even go to Normandy, but remained in the Reich's defenses. Parts of JG51 were thus uselessly bogged down at airfields in Vienna. The "Heeresgruppe Mitte" remained at the beginning of "Operation Bagration" only 40 operational fighters and 82 battle planes, but not a single long-range reconnaissance aircraft. Thus, "Heeresgruppe Mitte" was blinded during the decisive weeks. The exact details of the displacements from the area of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" have apparently been removed from the files. It is all the more striking that even several days after the start of "Operation Bagration" each fighter group in the east had to surrender a squadron to the Reich Defense. A false reporting system did the rest. "Officially", Luftflotte 6 had over 920 aircraft reported as operational on 20 June 1944, giving it more than the target strength of 904. These reportedly included 44 long-range reconnaissance aircraft and 99 close-in reconnaissance aircraft. Due to (artificial?) shortages of spare parts, just 602 aircraft were operational when "Operation Bagration" began. These figures included 434 fighter planes (286 of which were operational), but these were used by "Heeresgruppe Nord-Ukraine". In addition, the numbers of reconnaissance aircraft available to "Heeresgruppe Mitte" seem to have been "glossed over" in the proven manner, probably in order not to arouse suspicion. In fact, the lack of reconnaissance planes was so striking that after the beginning of "Bagration" the BF-109 fighters of JG51, which were far too few anyway, had to be used as makeshift reconnaissance planes in order to provide the High Command with a minimum of information about the course of the Russian major offensive. Tragically for the Germans, the Luftwaffe had recognized in time what was massing at "Heeresgruppe Mitte." On June 17, 1944, the OKL

had called Chief of Staff General Zeitzler directly to advise him that a major Russian offensive appeared to be brewing near Smolensk.¹ A captured Russian cipher officer testified that three Soviet fighter corps had arrived in the Smolensk area, one of them from the Crimea. Suddenly, the "Army Group Center" now faced so more than 4500 Soviet aviators. They joined the other 3500 planes at the center section. On June 18 and 19, 1944, Hitler had ordered the deployment of the IV Fliegerkorps, the last large German air force reserve in the East, to bomb the Soviet armies near Gomel. He rejected the repeated suggestion of certain gentlemen in the Luftwaffe leadership that the IV Air Corps should also be moved westward, at least in part, for mass mine deployment. Against the views of Zeitzler and Heusinger that the real Russian offensive would shortly begin at "Heeresgruppe Nord-Ukraine", the Luftwaffe received the following information from Hitler's Berghof on 21 June: "Army Group Center: General assessment that probably expected attack will begin tomorrow." At about 2 a.m. on 22 June, Hitler again ordered Luftflotte 6 to be notified that the expected major Soviet attack was to be expected in the early morning hours, and the Luftflotte was to be ordered to maximum readiness. But now something unbelievable happened! On the first day of "Operation Bagration", Ritter von Greim kept his Luftflotte 6 at their airfields all day long. He was told it would only be a diversionary attack. Whether Hitler's warning ever reached the leadership of Luftflotte 6 is therefore very doubtful. Thus it happened that the German air force did not shoot down a single Soviet aircraft on the first day of the large-scale attack, while the Russians were able to smash the decisive German positions from the air undisturbed.¹ Only when "Heeresgruppe Mitte" was defeated did the Luftwaffe begin to move reinforcements into the collapsing front area, slowly at first, then more and more rapidly. Not only from other front sections of the Eastern Front, but also from Italy, Normandy, and from schools in the Reich area, fighters and battle pilots were brought in. Eventually, by mid-July 1944, more German fighters were stationed on the Eastern Front than in the West, but much too late. Almost all operational German fighter aircraft operated with a focus only in the endangered sectors in the central section. Unlike during the outbreak of "Bagration", German strike planes now often flew seven or eight sorties a day, wreaking the greatest havoc among Soviet road convoys. As a result, there were thus major supply problems for front-line troops. Heavy German air raids at night by the IV Flieger-Korps and He-177

large bombers against the Soviet supply bases at Molodechno, Minsk, and Velikiye Luki further weakened the Red Army. Then, on July 28, when German battle planes shot down no fewer than 71 Soviet tanks, the Soviet armored armies were forced to temporarily halt their advance. This gave the Germans enough time to substantially reinforce their forces in the Warsaw area. It was thus also due to the Luftwaffe that the Soviets could be stopped once again near Warsaw and had great difficulty in overrunning the former Baltic states. The Luftwaffe also struck when the Soviets reached and immediately crossed the Vistula River in southern Poland at Baranow and Sandomierz, a hundred kilometers northwest of Warsaw, on July 22, 1944. While the German troops, in rafts they had assembled themselves, were descending in panic to the western bank, the Soviets were simultaneously advancing on the western bank in assault boats. Non-stop attacks by the FW-190s of Battle Squadrons 2 and 77 almost succeeded in ending the Russian advance on the other bank of the Vistula. On August 22, 1944 alone, the battle planes managed to sink 28 Soviet ferries. However, since the German ground forces had lost the western bank of the river, the Russian troops were able to entrench themselves in the bridgeheads at Baranow and Sandomierz. All this shows what was possible for the German air force on the Eastern Front as late as July 1944. One must ask why this concentration from the central section did not occur several weeks earlier. Current historiography apparently wants to make all this forgotten. For example, the MGFA informed the Bundeswehr that the air fleet 6 assigned to "Heeresgruppe Mitte" was reinforced before "Operation Bagration" because the buildup of Soviet air forces had been detected.¹ Reinforcement and simultaneous withdrawal to the west do not go together. Did an artificially initiated withdrawal of an entire army occur in Belarus? of an entire army? "All attempts of the unattacked 2nd Army (Weiss) to establish the cornerstone of a new front failed. Between the middle dune and Sluzk there was already a gap three hundred kilometers wide." ¹ Dahms wrote these two sentences in his work on the Second World War, published under international still settled participation. More than these ambiguously interpretable formulations one was not allowed to write in the sixties about the matter described below.

After all, this was the time when generals like Speidel and Heusinger held highest positions in the Bundeswehr and NATO. In the summer of 1944, the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" included not only the 4th and 9th Armies, which were directly threatened by the Russian onslaught, but also the 2nd Army. It was located in sufficiently fortified positions near the Pripjet Marshes. Although his army was not initially attacked, its chief of staff, General Henning von Tresckow, in the absence of the army's commander-in-chief, General Weiss, bent back the front of the 2nd Army corps to the east even before the first crises. He doctored reports that spoke of the hardest enemy pressure to cover artificial dismount movements. Wherever possible, he stepped up the retreat without notifying the Army High Command.¹ This had an effect not only in clearing the so-called "Pinsk Nose", but also at Baranovich, which Field Marshal Model was determined to hold. For this purpose, the High Command of the 2nd Army instructed Vormann's group to withdraw to certain blocking lines, but nothing was to be announced about this yet, orders were not to be given yet. And even when it came to Baranovich to keep free the last railroad junction and point of retreat from the Minsk cauldron, the 2nd Army informed that although Baranovici must be defended at all costs, it must be understood that enemy attacks will result in the authorization to abandon the city. The fortified place Baranowitschi was no longer to be stockpiled. Whether Field Marshal Model knew about these defeatist orders of the 2nd Army can hardly be assumed. Von Tresckow's biographer Scheurig justifiably emphasized in the post-war period that it was thanks to von Tresckow that later Field Marshal Model was able to establish fallback lines for which he would have used above all the divisions of the 2nd Army that had remained intact. In fact, however, it was the case that the retreat of the 2nd Army was carried out in part so rapidly that the 2nd Army divisions arriving at the loading stations could not be used by the "Heeres- gruppe" because they

continued to move westward so quickly on the railroad. Escape is another expression. Instead, already existing, completely exhausted troops had to be used by section shifts and extensions. At least an attempt was made to account for the troop units and rear services of the 2nd Army that were passing, based on the passage reports of the bridge officers. However, some of these units immediately loaded onto empty trains for transportation to Brest-Litovsk, which was far to the rear. Thus, these trains were missing the parts of combat-ready divisions waiting farther back.¹⁻² This does not look like 2nd Army cooperation with its comrades in the 4th and 9th Armies, who were in dire straits at the time, but is more reminiscent of Leuschner's testimony before the People's Court. In the end, the 2nd Panzer Army was very lucky. Had the Soviets' 1st Guards Tank Corps and 9th Panzer Corps, coming from the south, not been so fixated on the Minsk cauldron, and had they immediately turned west from Bobruisk, they would have run into the middle of the retreating 2nd Army. This would have meant the final German catastrophe. It is unknown to this day why the Red Army did not completely penetrate and destroy the German front between July 3 and July 8, 1944, when >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, with only 8 divisions left, had to lead the defense across 250 km of width between north Vilna and south Baranovichi. The German failure, influenced by betrayal, had opened the window for Stalin to "liquidate the Eastern Front" for a short time in early July. Vital transportation hub for both sides: the drama of Baranovichi When the Belorussian capital of Minsk, crammed with German supplies, was recaptured by the Soviets on July 3, 1944, the Red Army had not only regained the first major city to fall into the hands of the Wehrmacht in 1941, but had thus also trapped the bulk of the 4th Army and large parts of the 9th Army southeast of Minsk in a huge cauldron. In order to save what could still be saved, Field Marshal Model tried to establish a new main battle line far to the west behind Minsk in front of the Baranovichi-Molodechno line.³ The goal could only be to save as many of the German troops trapped in the Minsk cauldron as possible and to try to stop "Operation Bagration" to stop it. For this operation, Model was able to scrape together three armored divisions, a fighter division, two infantry divisions, and a Hungarian cavalry division. The 5th Panzer Division was relatively successful in clearing the important Minsk-Molodechno-Wilna railroad and thoroughfare north of Minsk, along which reinforcements from >Heeresgruppe Nord* were now approaching.

The 12th Panzer Division advanced southeast of Minsk to meet the advance divisions of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Corps. The 4th Armored Division and the 28th Fighter Division were to hold interception positions on both sides of Stolpce, keeping open the only route of retreat on Baranovichi. Baranovichi was an efficient railroad junction, which offered its owner the possibility of troop supply from the northwest, but also from the southeast and east, as well as their onward movement to the northwest, west or southwest. Baranovichi and its surroundings were also of great importance for the Red Army. If the Soviets wanted to get to the Vistula, they had to capture Baranovichi, and if the Germans wanted to save as much as possible from the Minsk cauldron, they had to hold Baranovichi. However, a group of high German officers acted exactly the opposite way. The whole thing took place in the southern section of >Heeresgruppe Mitte* with the 2nd Army (Chief of General Staff Henning von Tresckow). Parts of the 4th Panzer Division, which had arrived on June 30, were now to roll out to meet the 12th Panzer Division in the direction of Stolpce. But since only parts of the division had been unloaded and others still lacked fuel, only residual forces could attack. At the same time, the Hungarians of the 1st Royal Hungarian Cavalry Division, deployed to the left of the 4th Panzer Division, abandoned their positions at the slightest enemy pressure and fled inexorably to the west. In doing so, they abandoned roads that enjoyed crucial importance for supplies and communications with the 4th Panzer Division. In despair over the inadequate attitude of the Hungarian troops, the commanding general of the Harteneck Corps, General Harteneck, sent a letter to the Hungarian division commander asking him at least to begin dismounting movements of his troops only after notifying the German units fighting with them

and not to initiate such moves "beyond the 1'2 The question is why the Germans allowed the Hungarian division to take up a position at this decisive point, even though they were aware of its low fighting strength. It was conspicuous that the 2nd Army command did not use the promised 28th Jaeger Division for this position, but sent it to Vormann's group (formerly Army High Command 9) in a completely senseless manner. The 4th Panzer Division would have been the only rapidly moving unit that could provide effective defense against the Soviets' tank-supported attacks. However, it was senselessly sent piecemeal against Stolpce. Contributing to this was a curious miscommunication by the chief of Kampfgruppe Christern of the 4th Armored Division. Christern first showed strange hesitation in advancing on Stolpce, but then the colonel reported that the top of his Kampfgruppe was pinned down in the southern part of Stolpce in the face of heavy enemy artillery and Pak fire. This was a clear lie, since the 4th Armored Division never reached Stolpce or even the Njemen River, but rather only advanced to about 12 km from Stolpce. This false report then led to "misconceptions" at the Army Group and misleading instructions to the 12th Armored Division and the 20th Armored Division. Again, the Soviets were thus spared a danger. On July 4, 1944, the Red Army succeeded in raiding the corps command post of the Harteneck Corps at Talminobicz because the corps had relied here on fuses of Hungarian troops. While the corps managed to get some of its vehicles out, valuable files containing classified information, war diaries and records, and much of its intelligence equipment were left behind. Since the 2nd Army commander-in-chief was in the process of approaching the corps command post in a Fieseier >Storch<, he was still able to order an immediate battlefield attack. After that, the leader of the 4th Cavalry Brigade, by his own decision, let attack, taking advantage of this bombardment, and took back the corps command post at Kamino-Wicze, which had been plundered by the Russians, in a spirited attack. Again, the "peculiar nonchalance that had led to the temporary loss of the entire corps command post is striking. If the commander-in-chief of the 2nd Panzer Army had not landed late, he too would have found himself in the hands of the Russians. Only coincidences? Still, on July 7, it looked as if the 4th Armored Division, in conjunction with the 4th Cavalry Brigade, would be able to hold off the Soviets before Barano- vichi. The road to the Vistula would have remained blocked for the Russians. This led to desperation on the part of Marshal Zhukov. He resorted to drastic measures to give legs to General Batov, the commander of the 65th Army, who was obviously having problems taking Bar- anovich. In doing so, Zhukov did not shy away from threats. But now unbelievable events occurred on the German side. Meanwhile, the German defenders of Baranovich, foreseen by the OKH and the Army Group, had decided to abandon the defense of the city with expedients and deliberate plies. Zhukov would have been a load off his mind if he had learned of this! General von Vormann gave his chief of staff instructions to this effect: "You let the incursion into the city take place first, just no enclosure." And when on the same evening parts of the 4th Armored Division and the 4th Cavalry Brigade were defending on the outskirts of Baranovich, General von Vormann already had it reported by radio: "Enemy incursion into Baranovich." This made it absolutely clear that he wanted to abandon the defense of the crucial Baranovich junction and was only looking for a good reason to do so. For this purpose, even the High Command of the Army Group and the Fuehrer's Headquarters were fraudulently fooled into believing that there was house fighting. From noon of that day, the military installations in the city were already blown up. These destructions and demolitions of war-important installations and railroad facilities, carried out by the Security Regiment 611, were quite thorough and effective, much to the chagrin of the Soviet Army, which entered the city by midnight without much of a fight. Nevertheless, after the hasty abandonment of the strategically important town of Baranovich, artificially brought about by senior German officers, the way was clear for the Soviets to advance toward Brest-Litovsk and as far as the Vistula. For the remnants of five corps of the 4th and 9th German Armies trapped in the cauldron near Minsk, all hope of rescue was now lost. No fine way: Should

trapped soldiers be lured into a trap by "decoys"?

When rear fighters of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had fought their way back to the German main battle line, they reported strange events. According to them, persons dressed in German officers' and enlisted men's uniforms had attempted to deliberately lure the trapped men on the retreat into the hands of Soviet partisans or fighter commandos. The decoys were said to be conspicuous by their good knowledge of the area and were sometimes only unmasked because they had freshly laundered immaculate uniforms.¹ If this was initially regarded by the German interrogation officers as a rumor or latrine slogan, the reports then appeared in such a precise description and accumulation that these events could no longer be dismissed as fantasy. In fact, the NKFD ("Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland") and the BDO ("Bund Deutscher Offiziere"), in cooperation with Department VII of the Soviet NKVD, had sent hundreds of former German prisoners of war, Soviet officers who knew the language, and young Communist German cadres far behind the German lines, so that they could deliberately cause disinformation and unrest there, but also to track down scattered Wehrmacht soldiers, send them into captivity, or kill them. The decoys were trained, for example, at the front school of the First Ukrainian Front in Zhitomir. In some cases, the specially selected German POWs were quite poorly trained by their new employers before being sent across the lines. One of the most famous turncoats who lent himself to such work was the artillery lieutenant Rudolf Böhm. Under the name of "Oberleutnant Steffens", he was given the task, as a supposedly dispersed German officer, of seeking connections with German sabotage groups, former collaborators, and anti-Soviet resistance fighters, who were then liquidated by NKVD troops. He is said to have achieved great success. Böhm later became famous in the GDR and wrote many scripts for DEFA and "Television of the GDR".² Being caught by the Germans meant certain death for the false comrades. Their work was not made any easier by the fact that their job was not made easier by the fact that they were often sent across the lines with brand-new uniforms, poorly made papers, and misplaced awards. A great danger was also that Soviet front-line troops and partisans often made short work of these >unauthentic< Wehrmacht and SS members because they mistook the >Lockvögel< for real Germans. A-VII chief Burcew had his hands full to prevent such misunderstandings, which were often cruel and deadly for his staff, from getting out of hand. Even though it has never been known until today what great successes the NKVD Division A-VII achieved with its >Lockvögeln< in the fight against the retreating fighters of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte", the reports, which could not be kept secret, caused great bitterness in Germany against General von Seydlitz-Kurzbach. Obviously, the Soviets were very satisfied with the results of their >turning necks< against "Heeresgruppe Mitte", because in their spring offensive of 1945, the "false Germans" were again let loose on their former comrades as "decoys". The beacon for the opening of the Eastern Front? Why Vilnius had had to be lost The collapse of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" had allowed the Red Army to advance to the borders of East Prussia. On July 7,

1944, the battle for Vilnius began, the last bastion before the old German province. When German reconnaissance found out that the Soviets were bringing strong forces from the area in front of "Army Group North Ukraine" into the area in front of the 3rd Panzer Army, it was clear that their advance was aimed in the direction of Vilnius. It was an army, an armored army as well as four motorized corps. There was even fear of a Russian thrust on Königsberg. Field Marshal Model requested the immediate allocation of reinforcements by telex in early July, pointing out the serious threat to Vilnius. In response, "Heeresgruppe Mitte" announced that the 6th and 7th Panzer Divisions were on the march. However, they never arrived at the Vilna front. Instead, by the time Wilna was closed in on July 8, 1944, Grenadier Brigade 761 had just arrived. It proved to be completely defectively equipped: all MG without aiming device, without bipods, without mounts. legs, without mounts. For heavy weapons and heavy Pak, there was a lack of clothing and ammunition. The entire brigade did not even have anti-tank

equipment. According to the Army Group, it was to consist instead of fully equipped battalions of four companies each. In fact, however, only one reinforced regiment was sent to its doom with the mis-equipment shown. The second >Valkyrie< regiment GR 1067, brought from Vilna for reinforcement, had >accidentally< not reached Vilna.¹ Already two days before, 12500 men of the Polish Home Army had also risen against the German occupation in Wilna. In response, the Germans had 200 paratroopers of the 11/16th Parachute Regiment flown into the besieged city. When the Russian attack began on July 9, the commander of Wilna, Hitler's >Feste-Platz* specialist General Stahel, had no hope of success. The divisions made available for relief had previously taken a >conspicuously long time< to even get to the loading stations. Stahel's people were facing annihilation. During the night of July 12-13, 1944, the garrison of Testen Square* Vilna had to break out after the bravest defense. After 3000 men of the broken out garrison of Vilna as well as of the in the meantime also trapped Grenadier Regiment 1067 (Group Tolsdorf) reached the tops of the 6th Panzer Division northwest of Hof, the fate of the Testen Platz* Vilna ended. 7000 dead were left behind by the German defenders of Vilna. After the fall of Vilna, the Russians were also able to capture 5000 Polish resistance fighters, whom they promptly shipped to Siberia, while the NKVD treated their officers according to the >Katyn method*. In view of the obvious German failure of leadership before Vilna, Generalfeldmarschall Model then also harbored doubts as to whether the >Führer< had even realized the scope of the aggravation that had occurred in the meantime. General Heusinger, Chief of the Army Operations Department, at least confirmed to him that he had "truthfully described" the situation to Hitler. We will return to this.² The unresolved question is whether the loss of Wilna, now blamed on Hitler's stubbornness, did not play a triggering role in the ^liquidation planned by high-ranking officers planned ^liquidation of the Eastern Front. The General Staff and Luftwaffe were already planning to move their command posts from East Prussia to Potsdam. The >defaitism< of the General Staff became so strong that Hitler had to decide to return immediately from Berchtesgaden to Rastenburg, even though the reconstruction of the Führer's headquarters >Wolfschanze< was not yet finished. Only by his physical presence he believed to be able to prevent a defeat by >defaitism<.¹ In fact, this situation was more than coincidence and fitted a concept that will be revealed below. Where the Soviet blitzkrieg tactic came from in the summer of 1944 came from and who found a response to it. In the spring of 1944, the Soviets had learned in the Kovel area that mass attacks were hardly successful despite heavy own losses. Now they wanted to do everything differently. In the summer of 1944, the Soviets for the first time applied the tactics of breakthrough and >overtaking pursuit< that had been used successfully by the Wehrmacht in 1939-41. The model for Zhukov's Guard armies was provided by the advance of German tank forces to the Atlantic coast at Abbeville, now in Russia, with breakthrough of tanks into the depths of the German frontal rear, overtaking pursuit, and cutting off the halted German frontal elements from their rearward communications and supplies. This tactic, which had been observed by the Soviets in previous years but was never properly understood, was introduced to the Soviet command cadres by German Field Marshal Paulus, who had become a Soviet prisoner of war, through his classes at the Frunse Academy in Moscow. At the same time, Paulus also pointed out the potential weaknesses of this tactic.²⁻³ This act of betrayal allowed the Soviets to use the tactic formerly used so successfully by Germany as >Blitzkrieg< against its inventors. It was not until Generalfeldmarschall Model succeeded, then without any war-historical precedent, in going against the earlier German tactic by coming up with something new. It is his unbelievable achievement that after smashing two-

times the German lines in the east, the planned liquidation of the eastern front according to the Hermann Plan had finally failed. A >orderly liquidation*, as the originators of the Hermann Plan wanted it, would never have become anyway. We will deal with this further on. Until today, the so important tank battle before Warsaw is either concealed in Soviet literature or mentioned only in a hint. The Russians had been lucky once again, because after Model had been able to destroy most of the Soviet armored units at Wolomin, it was planned to surround and destroy the 47th Soviet Army, which had rushed to the aid of the 2nd Panzer Army, in a similar concentric attack. However, the 19th Panzer Division had to be disengaged from the front that same day and the Germann-Göring* Parachute Panzer Division the following day. Both units were to prevent the Soviet bridgehead west of the Vistula at Ma- gnuszew from expanding. By this > hasty redeployment, the 47th Soviet Army < was saved from certain defeat. Still Stalin seemed to have guardian angels with the German leadership. On the evening of August 4, 1944, the German formations in front of Warsaw again went on the defensive. The deployment of the two divisions, without which the concentric attack on the 47th Soviet Army could not be carried out, could certainly have waited another day or two. If it had been wanted! Of course, the bridgehead at Magnuszew was not eliminated by the Germans. C) The phony >Autumn Miracle< - Was the frontal stabilization in the middle section? Hitler's destroyed >Schlieffen plans 2.0< and >3.0< - The indirect Effects of Betrayal in East and West Already since 1943 Hitler let it be known that in his opinion a strategic victory in the East was no longer possible. He therefore planned to inflict a decisive defeat on the impending Allied invasion of France in order to still bring about a turning point in the war. Therefore, more and more tanks, airplanes and artillery moved to the west, although on the eastern front the Russian forces were growing day by day. Hitler wanted to throw 35 divisions to the Eastern Front immediately after a defensive victory on the Atlantic and resume the offensive there. With this asymmetrical shift of forces, he wanted to have them attack southward from the area of >Heeresgruppe Mitte< in order to get hold of the Ukrainian industrial area again as in 1941. The events of June 1944 made this concept a waste of time. Not only had the Allies succeeded in defeating the Wehrmacht in Normandy largely through German treachery, but also in the east the major Soviet attack against >Heeresgruppe Mitte< in the summer of 1944 grew into the greatest German defeat of all time. Hitler's >Schlieffen Plan 2.0< was wastepaper. The casualty balance of those days on the German side will probably never be fully known. In fact 28 divisions with 350000 to 400000 men perished. Tens of thousands are lost until today. The Russian troops also suffered terrible losses despite their overwhelming victory. They lost a total of 440879 men from June 23 to the end of July 1944, which corresponded to about 30 percent of the personnel strength. The Red Army's tank losses also remained amazingly clear in favor of the Wehrmacht in >Bagration< at a ratio of 5:1. The >Autumn

Miracle 1944< then brought new optimism to the German leadership from September 1944 onward. A >Schlieffen Plan 3.0< was planned. Here, one wanted to hold the Eastern Front, while in the West German reserves were surrendered to the Anglo-Americans in the Ardennes and in the Schlieffen Plan 2.0 and Schlieffen Plan 3.0 – Hitler's counterattack plans of 1944/45 (after Frieser, et al. (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 8, DVA. Munich 2007). Alsace a terrible defeat and force them to leave the European continent. After that, there would have been a rapid shift of emphasis to the east. This time the armored reserves from Courland as well as from the Generalgouvernement would have advanced pincer-like into the Baltic States.¹ It was perfectly clear to Hitler that all these >Schlieffen plans< would no longer have brought victory, but merely bought time to hope for a disintegration of the Allied coalition or to be able to bring the weapons of victory to bear. After the German Battle of the Bulge bogged down due to artificially induced fuel shortages, the >Schlieffen Plan 3.0< also failed. Stalin, at Churchill's request, preferred his own attack to rescue the Western Allies from their still desperate situation. Why the Vistula bridgeheads could not be recaptured At the conclusion

of >Operation Bagration<, Soviet forces succeeded in forming several smaller bridgeheads across the Vistula in late July 1944. The most dangerous of these for the Wehrmacht were at Baranow (Sandomierz) and Magnuszew. After their terrible losses in >Operation Bagration<, the Wehrmacht had hardly any troops left to tackle the dangerous Soviet bridgeheads. However, before the Soviets were in a position to throw substantial reinforcements across the river, an attempt had to be made as quickly as possible to quickly and effectively depress the dangerous Red bridgeheads if the river was to be preserved as an effective defense system. In view of the desperate situation on all other fronts, the Army High Command threw the first heavy tank battalion 501, fully equipped with the new >King Tiger<, against the Soviet bridgehead at Baranov. After all, this was the most dangerous bridgehead, since behind it lay terrain suitable for tanks. At the same time, Baranow was the closest geographic point to Berlin in Allied hands at the time. Panzer Battalion 501 was the first to arrive at the Ohrdruf training area with the full authorized complement of 45 of the newly- en >Königstiger< tanks. A considerable force.¹⁻³ But of the newly formed unit under the command of Major von Legat, 14 "Königstiger< tanks had to be left behind due to technical deficiencies as soon as they were transferred to the disposition area on August 5, 1944. They were not put on the march until a week later. Thus it happened that only 31 "Königstiger were unloaded at the Kielce station. Already during the subsequent transfer march to the 16th Panzer Division, to which the heavy tank division 501 was subordinated, 10 "Königstiger< tanks were again left behind with technical failure on the short 3 km route. When on 11 August 1944, after two days of repair and resupply, the battalion reached Szydłow, again only 11 of the 20 "Königstiger< tanks there were operational. Thus valuable days passed, giving the Soviets time to reinforce their bridgehead with dug-in T- 34, JS-2, and JS-85 tanks. Finally, on August 13, 1944, only 11 "King Tigers < were able to move in for the attack on the bridgehead. Without much planning and without orientation, Major von Legat had his tanks attack without flank protection and in duck line. After only a short time, three "Königstiger had fallen victim to dug-in Soviet tanks, which were now able to shoot down the giant German tank from distances of less than 400 meters. When the Red Army counterattacked the same day and occupied the town of Ogledow, the Russians found there three "King Tigers abandoned by the Germans. Two of these had apparently been abandoned because of mechanical defects, while the third "Königstiger was abandoned completely intact, with fuel and ammunition. Over the next two days, the Soviet tanks were able to shoot down seven more "Königstigers of Panzer Battalion 501, so that the Soviet track record amounted to 14 destroyed or captured "Königstigers out of a total inventory of about 30 or 31 German tanks. In contrast, the Red Army had lost only three "Josef Stalin IL tanks as total losses and seven badly damaged ones.⁴⁻⁵ It was also significant that of the

three intact German "Königstiger" tanks stopped at Ogledow, two had command vehicles numbered 502 and 102. This means that German commanders let their tanks fall undestroyed into enemy hands – in the case of the deputy vehicle still fully fit for action. Obviously, the gentlemen officers had no inclination for heroic death. In the meantime, the field maintenance personnel of Heavy Tank Division 501 were trying to find out the cause of the frequent transmission failure of the >Königstiger<, which had been haunting the division since Ohrdruf. The workshop company used its own means to examine the side transmission gears on all tanks. Strangely enough, this assembly worked far more reliably everywhere after it had been disassembled, thoroughly overhauled, and reassembled. In subsequent missions, the side drives held up, and power transmission was trouble-free. It was completely inexplicable to the tank men why this conspicuous defect had not been noticed immediately either in the manufacturing plant or in Ohrdruf. The word >Sabota- ge< was mentioned in this context. Of course, the culprits were never discovered! On August 22, 1944, again three >Kingstiger< were senselessly lost in a battle near Radom. To get into attack position, the tanks had to show their uncovered flank to the enemy. As predicted by the men of the division, heavy losses occurred immediately. After this last failure, the division commander, Major von Legat, was relieved because he was suspected of being involved in the conspiracy of July 20, 1944. July 20, 1944 conspiracy. If Abteilung 501 had attacked the bridgehead promptly in full combat strength, with technically functional vehicles and under good leadership, the result would probably have been a German victory. The situation was somewhat different in the battle for the bridgehead at Ma- gnuszew. Here the Germans attacked with massive pressure, especially by the >Hermann Göring* Division and the 19th Panzer Division with artillery and air strikes. Partly it succeeded in bringing the Soviet defenders of the bridgehead into greatest distress. However, the German tanks had to evacuate the already captured enemy positions shortly before the shore, because no infantry had come with them to the front to hold the captured positions. Here, once again, the lack of infantry, largely caused by the withholding of reinforcements at home, took its revenge. Thus the Soviets managed to remain victors in the race against time, holding off German counterattacks until sufficient reinforcements of their own came across from the other side of the river. Both bridgeheads were to help seal the fate of the Third Reich in January 1945. Should a forged Fuehrer order decimate the Panzergrenadier Division "Greater Germany* to be decimated?

On August 12, 1944, the German Wehrmacht report stated: "Southwest of Kowno, the town of Wilkowischken was regained in the counterattack. In these last days the enemy lost here 69 tanks and assault guns and 61 field guns." Behind it was hidden a tragic incident. After the destruction of >Heeresgruppe Mitte*, the Red Army had reached the Gulf of Riga near Tuksum on July 29, 1944, thus finally breaking the link between "Heeresgruppe Nord* and the re-established "Heeresgruppe Mitte*. In this situation the Panzergrenadier Division "Großdeutschland* was moved to East Prussia by rail in a lightning transport. It represented one of the elite divisions of the German Wehrmacht and since 1943 had earned the reputation of a "fire brigade*. Although "Großdeutschland* had been considered a panzergrenadier divisi- on since 1943, it was equipped with more tanks than most ei- gual panzer divisions. Its armored combat vehicle equipment included a >Panther< division with four companies, a Panzer IV division with four companies, and also a heavy division with >Tiger< tanks, divided into three platoons.¹ Division commander General von Manteuffel was ordered to Führer Headquarters shortly before the mission. He said, "There I was told to state exactly the strength of the division and how high I thought its striking power would be." Manteuffel suspected that something monstrous was afoot, and therefore had Hitler give him written instructions that >Großdeutschland< was to be deployed only as a united force. No sooner had von Manteuffel left for Trakehnen in East Prussia, where his division was assembling, than the army commander, General Reinhardt, appeared at

Manteuffel's command post two hours later. When Reinhardt asked to be informed about the earliest possible combat readiness, von Manteuffel told him that >Großdeutschland< would not be fully ready for action for several days, once all parts had arrived here. He also drew Reinhardt's attention to the fact that, even according to Hitler's will, the division was to be deployed only as a unit. Shortly thereafter, however, on the afternoon of August 8, 1944, von Manteuffel received a radio message from the Fuehrer's headquarters: "The Panzer Grenadier Division >Großdeutschland< is to move immediately in the direction of Wilkowschken to attack and destroy the enemy shock troops attacking there." This order was a puzzle to General von Manteuffel. Neither was his division fully assembled, nor had they been able to make an initial reconnaissance. In accordance with orders, the division then went on the attack without any preparatory artillery fire at the beginning of the day on August 9, 1944. In the process, the Panzer Regiment >Großdeutschland< was also deployed in deep formation. After only half an hour, the division drove into massive defensive fire from Soviet Paks, tanks, and field guns. Again, it seemed as if the Soviets were already expecting the division, and within an hour 80 German tanks and armored vehicles were lost. Nevertheless, by the evening the town of Willkowschken, 25 km behind the enemy front, was reached and taken possession of. General von Manteuffel now received a radio message from his chief of staff, Major General von Natzmer: "You are to report to FHQ in Rastenburg tomorrow morning." It seemed perfectly clear to von Natzmer that a perfidious game was going on here, and he urged von Manteuffel to telephone the Führer's headquarters in Rastenburg beforehand and try to ensure that he would also be received by Colonel General Guderian. When General von Manteuffel came face to face with Hitler a little later, however, the latter inveighed without direct attack against the panzer general that >Großdeutschland< had lost 82 tanks. These were more vehicles than the Russians had lost in the German attack. When Hitler remained silent, von Manteuffel said, "I have brought you, my Führer, a Führer order." Von Manteuffel now read to Hitler that the division, not yet fully arrived, in an unreconnoitered area, had been ordered by Hitler to attack. Hitler was now, according to von Manteuffel, completely dismayed. He called for his adjutant and had Field Marshal Keitel brought in. General von Manteuffel was asked to repeat his report, and when he had finished, Hitler set off as von Manteuffel had never heard him before. It came out that the alleged Führer order had not come from Hitler at all.¹ General von Manteuffel had admittedly been able to prevent his division, which was certainly one of the strongest German units on the Eastern Front at the time, from being >missed< piecemeal during his previous visit to FHQ. Instead, his division was trickily deployed as a whole but incompletely and without any reconnaissance or artillery preparation against a Russian enemy apparently already informed of their attack. Whether this had been an unfortunate misunderstanding, as the conversation between Hitler and Keitel is said to have revealed, seems quite doubtful in view of the previous history. Again, there were no sanctions against the suspected saboteurs operating in the shadow of the Führer's headquarters. In this respect it is hardly surprising that the events at Willkowschken, which had already been cleared by the Germans on August 18, 1944, are not mentioned in official history. are practically not mentioned in official histories of the Second World War. These are probably questions that should not be asked. D) The collapse of the southern flank of the Eastern Front It was not only the king - Who was behind the downfall of the of the Germans in Romania? Within just a few days, the second major disaster of the German Wehrmacht occurred at the end of August 1944. The consequences were a shattering of the German southeastern front, the loss of the Romanian oil territory, and personnel losses equal to those of the Battle of Stalingrad. It had all started with the Soviet large-scale attack under the name of >Operation Jassy-Kishinev<, which took place on August 20, 1944 on the territory of former Bessarabia and today's Moldova. As late as spring, things had initially looked quite promising for the troops of the Axis powers Germany and Romania. In April and May 1944, the

reconstituted 6th Army had repulsed a large-scale invasion attempt by the Russians with the loss of 200,000 Red Army soldiers. Now it was necessary to repeat this success, but things were to turn out completely differently. The 6th German Army, together with its Romanian comrades, had created a main fighting position several kilometers deep in months of entrenchment work. There, a combined 24 German and 25 Romanian divisions and brigades were waiting. They had a total strength of about 650,000 men. Among them were 340,000 German soldiers. The German infantry divisions were almost fully replenished and rested. It seemed alarming, however, that after the collapse of >Heeresgruppe Mitte* almost all German armored reserves were withdrawn in order to stabilize the eastern front in the central section once again. This left only 160 tanks and 283 assault guns for defense, more than half of which were with Romanian armored divisions. On the evening of August 19, 1944, German posts reported that light signals and flares could be seen on the Russian side could be seen, which were answered in places by the Romanians.¹ When the Russian operation broke out on August 20, 1944, the Red Army penetrated the several hundred kilometer long front line only in a few narrow places. Those sections of the front where Romanian units were located were specifically selected for this purpose. The fact that the Russians put all their eggs in one basket is shown by the fact that breakthrough points were only 5 to 8 km wide due to the heavily fortified defensive positions. As at Jassy, the Romanians did not defend themselves against the attackers one day later at Tiraspol, but had already left their trenches during the Russian preparatory fire and disappeared to the rear. Other Romanians abandoned their positions at the beginning of the attack and threw away their rifles. After secret negotiations the previous night, the 4th Romanian Mountain Brigade in particular had cleared individual positions in its defensive section and deliberately allowed the enemy to seep into their positions. Armored German counterattacks with only a few tanks showed surprising success. However, since the Romanian armored division >Great Romania< did not participate in the counterattack anymore and simply moved off, this also failed. It seems unbelievable from today's point of view that the Army High Command of the 6th German Army, located far in the rear in Tarantino, was not yet aware of the danger on that August 20, that the front with the Romanians on both wings was already completely broken. was completely broken. The offensive at Jassy was supposedly not yet known to the army command at all. In fact, in the center of the front, the Germans were still completely calm. Thus, the 257th Infantry Division even held a general division sports festival on August 20 and 21. By this time, the Soviets had already succeeded in pushing westward for more than 50 kilometers through the gaps in the front that had been opened up among the Romanians. All attempts of the Romanian leader Marshal Antonescu to bring his soldiers to a halt were completely in vain. Instead, individual senior Romanian officers and commanders who had knowledge of the impending coup had dismissed their troops home with the slogan, "Let the war be over." Other units, such as the Romanian 4th Mountain Brigade or the 5th Cavalry Division, had committed direct treason shortly before or at the beginning of the Soviet offensive. The army commander, General Mihai Racoritză, had previously participated, together with General Aurel Aldea, in negotiations for which emissaries of the Soviet High Command appeared at the Carpathian monastery of Caehlau during the night of August 21-22. Both generals then saw to it that the Romanian front supposedly opened up to the Soviets at the 5th Cavalry Division.^{1/2} Some Romanian units, such as the 1st Cavalry Division or the 11th Infantry Division, completely abandoned by their officers, fought bravely and continued to fight together with German soldiers. Even when the Army Group Command of Southern Ukraine was informed of the catastrophic situation, it did not decide to withdraw the 6th Army to the Prut River. Allegedly, there was no authorization from the Fuehrer's headquarters to do so. Equally striking about the behavior of the High Command of "Army Group Southern Ukraine" in Slanic was that during the first two decisive days they hardly contacted the Fuehrer's headquarters in Rastenburg and at most gave sparse optimistic reassurance messages that

had nothing to do with the truth. It seems as if certain people wanted to avoid a hasty entry into force of Hitler's order to retreat. Was this order known to some people, even though it had allegedly never arrived in Romania? When on the morning of August 22, 1944 the High Command of the 6th Army ordered by radio the retreat to the Pruth starting at 7:30 p.m., it was already much too late for the execution of the order. Now the troops in the central section, which had not yet been attacked, had also disengaged from their extended positions in accordance with the order. On the evening of August 23, the 6th Army had left only a narrow passage near Husy on its way to the Pruth, along which the pursuing German troop masses intended to cross the following night. The Soviets, however, had already taken Husy by midday. While the troops of the 6th Army were crushed within three days in the now developing cauldron, the catastrophe in Romania occurred, which was to bring doom for hundreds of thousands of German soldiers: Overthrow in Romania!

State leader Marshal Antonescu was arrested, the young Romanian pro-Allied King Michael took over the leadership of the country. Romania laid down its arms and shortly thereafter declared war on the Germans. By August 23, the Romanians had shown genuine comradeship toward the Germans, at least outwardly. Only on the left wing of the Army Group had Romanian units taken advantage of their position of trust after the Russian attack began and attacked German command posts and task forces from the rear. They tried to engage German gunners in conversation, only to capture them and hand them over to the Soviets tied to each other. After Romania declared war on Germany, the Romanians closed the mousetrap. They attacked, long prepared, German rear services and lone supply bases. Fatally, they also blocked retreat roads, bridges and Carpathian passes to saving Hungary. In the end, only individual soldiers and smaller units of the 6th Army managed to make their way across the Carpathians to the Hungarian-Romanian border in Transylvania. Only the 8th Army was able to save itself as a combat-capable unit. To this day, there is still widespread obscurity about the course of the great betrayal in Romania. However, not only >traitorous< Romanians contributed to this catastrophe, which brought captivity and death to hundreds of thousands of Germans. It is already striking that in the postwar literature of responsible German military officers there was no agreement, but hidden hints exist that something should be hidden here besides the usual different views of the reporting. On July 25, 1944, Colonel General Hans Friessner took over the supreme command of >Heeresgruppe Süd< In addition to the change of the supreme commander, there was a simultaneous - militarily completely unusual - recall of the Chief of the General Staff, the capable Lieutenant General Wenck, whose post was taken over by Major General Helmuth von Grolmann, who remained

Chief of the General Staff of >Heeresgruppe Süd< until March 23, 1945. On August 5, 1944, during his fateful visit to the Führer's headquarters, the Romanian chief of staff, Marshal Antonescu, had offered Hitler to vacate Moldavia and return to the Ga-lat-Focsani-Karpathenkamm line if the overall interests of the allies made this necessary. Friessner, too, shortly after Antonescu's visit to the Fuehrer's headquarters, had made a request to Hitler to move the front back to the same line. Colonel General Guderian wrote on the subject: "The latter (Hitler) also decided to agree by way of exception, but made the issuing of final orders and the execution of his decision conditional on the reporting of positive indications of the enemy's intention to attack. Until then, the present fronts were to be held." Allegedly, according to Guderian, Hitler gave his authorization to evade immediately to >Heeresgruppe Süd<.1 General Friessner, however, wrote in the postwar period that he never learned that Hitler had agreed to his request. On the contrary, all requests had been rejected because Hitler had made his decision to move the front back conditional on reporting "positive indications of enemy intent to attack." Friessner was convinced that Hitler had apparently been deprived of the ongoing warnings from >Heeresgruppe Süd< of an impending Russian attack. Only on August 22, 1944, i.e., much too late, had the authorization for a saving retreat been received from the Fuehrer's

headquarters.¹ In fact, in order to continue to exist in the event of a Romanian failure, an immediate retreat and the swift occupation of the Danube bridges would have been necessary. Since this did not happen, however, the Romanians beat the Germans to the punch, blocking the crossings and delivering the German formations to the Russians. Generals Friessner and Guderian therefore wanted to clarify together in the post-war period what had really happened. However, this rectification never came about, as Guderian died prematurely. Those responsible for the mess could breathe a sigh of relief. Also, the German intelligence services made every effort to misinform their own troops about the imminent Russian attacks. Increased activity and conspicuously greater traffic behind the Russian front were noted, but this was misinterpreted. Gehlen announced that the Soviet leadership would withdraw forces from the southern front in order to further intensify its formidable and successful offensive currently under way against >Heeresgruppe Mitte<. Then, when Russian intentions to attack became undeniable as of 8 August, and German air reconnaissance observed the Soviets substantially reinforcing their artillery against the German-Romanian front, making a withdrawal ridiculous but indicating an imminent offensive, the >Foreign Armies East< Division believed only in a "localized attack." Only then did Army High Command 8 provide an accurate account that the Second Ukrainian Front opposite it was making preparations for a major attack with breakthrough intentions. Nevertheless, the Army High Command and the staff of >Heeresgruppe Süddukraine< still did not announce that the Soviets were marching up for a large-scale operation.⁶ Then, on the evening of 19 August 1944, immediately before the Russian major attack, Colonel General Friessner realized that the Russians would move west of the Pruth the following day for the expected >major attack<. He drew this conclusion after discussing discussions with both >Heeresgruppe Südukraine< and the German 6th and 8th Armies, as well as with Luftflotte 4, and after evaluating the ongoing reports from the subordinate command areas. Nevertheless, in the case of the 6th Army, not even an alert was given to the entire front section. Parts of the unattacked center of the front thus carried out their aforementioned sporting festivities. Not only was the available information about the start of the enemy's major offensive not passed on, but the 6th Army command authorities were also left in the dark about the serious changes in the south wing. They apparently felt unable to make arrangements to respond quickly and effectively to an enemy encirclement. Instead, the 6th Army commander in chief, General Fretter-Pico, abandoned his encircled formations to their fate. Neither the 6th Army Commander-in-Chief nor his Chief of Staff stayed with their hard-pressed troops in Bessarabia at the critical moments. The command post of the Army High Command was moved 300 km away from the battlefield to Tecuci. They had also "forgotten" to appoint a commanding general for the 6th Army trapped in the cauldron. Thus, not only the soldiers, but also the formations and units without command were left to their own devices in the cauldron. The result was rapid annihilation by the Red Army. In the post-war period, General Fretter-Pico as well as General Kissel claimed that they had received a Führer order on August 22, 1944, according to which the army staff was not allowed to be encircled. To this day, however, no evidence has been found in the files of Army Group South Ukraine that such a Fuehrer order was ever received or that a corresponding order was ever issued to the High Command of the 6th Army. Due to this seemingly disreputable procedure, the almost complete destruction of the 6th Army could no longer be prevented. At the same time the possibility to stop the Soviet offensive in Northern Bessarabia with an until then still intact 6th Army was extinguished. Questions about the motives seem justified. Desperate attempts to keep the retreat route open for the German 6th Army at the Pruth River by moving mobile operational reserves of Army Group Wöhler (8th Army) to the area between Iasi and Husi failed when the Romanians called off the joint combat command on the evening of 22 August 1944. The Romanian commander-in-chief, General Avramescu, resigned from his post because he could not reconcile it with his conscience to follow the vote of the military leadership in Bucharest and withdraw his troops. All

further hopes were then dashed by the coup d'état in Bucharest on August 23, 1944. Marshal Antonescu, who had been a pro-German leader until then, was arrested in violation of the constitution by the young Romanian King Michael, who took over the leadership of the country. Romania laid down its arms and demanded that German troops withdraw from the country within 48 hours. Only a few hours later, Romania declared war on its former ally. In fact, years of preparations had preceded the events of August 23. After a group of several parties had laid the groundwork for assuming political and military responsibility, party leaders, a military committee composed of trusted officers, and representatives of the king agreed in a secret meeting on August 21, 1944, to overthrow Marshal Antonescu and his government five days later. However, the coup planned for August 26 had to be carried out already on the morning of August 23, since Antonescu himself had suggested to the king to let Romania unilaterally stop the fight against Russia, for which he only wanted to obtain Hitler's approval. A >Finland solution< seemed to be on the horizon, and with it salvation for the German armies in the country. Since Antonescu's proposal threatened to cause the opposition's plans to fail, King Michael ordered the coup d'état to be carried out. As early as June 1944, the Romanian Grand General Staff had ordered all military and civilian agencies to register and report all German formations, agencies and institutions present on the territory of the kingdom, with exact unit designations and precise details of deployment and personnel. This secret operation against the ally went under the name of >Cosma<. For tactical reasons, however, there were no written orders to this effect.¹ On the basis of this registration, the large general staff was in a position to get an exact picture of the fighting strength of the allied German troops in Romania and to strike mercilessly and quickly. Thus, as early as the evening of August 24, 1944, the German offices and barracks in Bucharest were surrounded by Romanian units and a communist revolutionary guard. In the same night the disarmament and capture of the German soldiers, officials as well as civilians began. Even women did not escape this fate. The overthrow and change of sides of the Romanians came as a complete surprise to Hitler and the German high command in Rastenburg. The numerous incoming warnings from Romanians loyal to Germany, members of the German ethnic group as well as from the military side were virtually suppressed.²⁻³ Colonel General Friessner wrote in his book *Betrayed Battles* about the German military mission in Bucharest:

"It remained incomprehensible to me that the subversive phenomena allegedly remained hidden even from this military office in Bucharest." In fact, the German Army Mission in Romania was well aware of the activities of the oppositions, especially that a >counter-government< had already been formed, which was in airmail contact with the enemy abroad. The place of the meetings, an estate near Giurgiu, was also known. In fact, extensive details about the plans of the Romanian opposition were presented as early as May 1944 in a meeting of the German air force mission.⁴ The question is therefore whether the German officials in Romania, who had been warned from various quarters and pointed out in detail individual acts of treason, had become operationally blind or deliberately failed to pass on or downplayed their findings. If one believes the former Romanian ambassador in Germany, Gheorghe, many warning reports were not presented to Hitler, but remained with various offices. Especially the German ambassador Baron von Killinger sent continued reassurance pills to the Fuehrer's headquarters.⁵⁷

The same was true for the defense of Admiral Canaris until early 1944, which is not surprising if one knows about the more than questionable activities of the >Office Canaris<. While General Hansen, head of the German military mission in Romania, was considered a loyal partisan of former Colonel General Beck, the German envoy in Romania, Baron von Killinger, was also an unrecognized opponent of Hitler. Von Killinger was particularly protected by Admiral Canaris. His son-in-law, Lieutenant Count von Holtzendorff, whom von Killinger, as an officer in the air force mission, had also temporarily placed on Marshal Antonescu's staff, reported that the envoy had engaged in conspiratorial

activities for the benefit of anti-German forces. These had also taken place in cooperation with Marshal Antonescu. Von Killinger also met with Anglo-American agents in the Carpathians during alleged bear hunts near Sinaja on the Predeal Pass. Holtzendorff received a request from his father-in-law to meet with Randolph Churchill, the son of the British prime minister, at Marshal Tito's house in Yugoslavia for negotiations. Von Holtzendorff refused, however, on the grounds that he did not want to participate in treason. As early as 1943, suspicions arose that treason was at work in the German legation. An explosive note had been discovered, written on the typewriter of Heia Peterson, Killinger's secretary and presumed mistress. The Gestapo's investigations, which then began at full speed, came to nothing. Killinger and Antonescu had a plan to let the Allies land in the Balkans. Through this "stab in the soft underbelly," the Allies were to advance into Romania from the Dalmatian coast and Greece. While the German eastern front fought its way back to the west, the Allies would have to push northward through Vienna to the Baltic Sea, according to the conspirators' plans at the time. The planned result was a Western Allied cordon between the onrushing Russians and the German front, with von Killinger speculating, "From now on, the Allies would be our allies, Europe would be saved." When von Holtzendorff called this "treason," von Killinger countered with the "treason of 1934," by which he meant that Röhm action "in which the revolution of the SA had been decapitated." Killinger wanted to vouch to Churchill "to liquidate Hitler in due course. He would be the only one who had the opportunity here at any time - and he would do it". To what extent Manfred von Killinger was connected with the men of "July 20" in 1944 is unknown to this day. After the failure of July 20, however, the Gestapo is said to have already investigated him. That the men of "20 July" also had influence in Romania was described by the former Romanian ambassador in Berlin, General Ion Gheorghe: "I remember. . . according to which arrests were said to have been made in connection with the assassination in Bucharest as well. I had not previously learned any names or other details, but today I am convinced that here, too, lay part of the cause of the later collapse in Romania."1 No one knows to this day to what extent Marshal Antonescu and the German Ambassador von Killinger expected the Western Allies to intervene in Romania even after the Normandy invasion had begun. It is quite possible that there were false Anglo-American promises or illusions here. As early as August 7, 1944, the Romanian Air Ministry had issued a confidential directive that Romanian fighter pilots, who had been quite successful up to that point, were to cease their attacks on Western Allied bombers and escort fighters. Individual Romanian fighter pilots, however, violated this directive and attacked the Allied terror planes anyway. This had been preceded by Alfred Gerstenberg, commanding general of the defense of the oil installations around Ploiesti, appealing to Captain Serbanescu, commander of Grupul 9 Vanatore, not to leave the Germans alone in their fight against the bomber streams. On August 18, Serbanescu and his group took off against instructions from Bucharest. The popular Romanian fighter pilot was shot down by the Americans in the process. The next day saw the last U.S. attack on the oil area of Ploiesti. The Western Allies also knew what was about to happen.2 Two days after the coup, the highly decorated Romanian fighter pilot Captain Cantacuzino, a fighter ace with 56 confirmed aerial victories, flew to Foggia in southern Italy to deliver a memorandum from the Romanians to the Western Allies in his Messerschmitt Bf-109 G-6. Cantacuzino also packed the highest-ranking captured U.S. officer, Lieutenant Colonel James A. Gun, into his Messerschmitt as proof. Even the memorandum of the new Romanian government did not change the attitude of the Western Allies. They had long since ceded Romania to the Soviets. In fact, the conspiratorial group had telegraphed the Anglo-Americans in Cairo. It had the king's agreement that the requested (and promised?) airborne troops should be sent soon. But only massive U.S. bombers arrived to help stop General Gerstenberg's German counterattack against the Romanians. This was all! Baron von Killinger also failed completely with his conspiracy against the Reich government. When the leader of the German ethnic group in Romania,

Andreas Schmidt, arrived at the Fuehrer's headquarters in mid-August 1944 to present evidence of an impending Romanian apostasy, his efforts were thwarted by von Killinger. The latter informed the German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop by telegraph that these were all latrine rumors, and that there could be no doubt about Romania's loyalty to the alliance. Because the evidence that the center of the resistance was formed around King Michael I became all too clear, von Killinger received the order to arrest the king from Germany at about 8 a.m. on August 23, 1944. Instead, the ambassador, together with his secretary, spent the whole of August 23 at his country house on Lake Snagov, where the telephone message of the king's coup reached him. It was not until around 7:30 p.m. that the ambassador is said to have arrived at the legation and sought an audience with Michael I at court. After the coup in Romania, von Killinger realized that it was not the Western Allies he expected, but the Soviets who would occupy Romania. Locked up in the German legation, von Killinger committed suicide with his secretary on the morning of September 2, 1944, to avoid arrest by Young Communists. It is quite obvious that the German envoy as well as leading representatives of the German military mission in Romania must be considered among the main responsible for the Romanian catastrophe triggered by the betrayal of August 23, 1944. Whatever the ultimate reasons for their actions may have been, in view of the countless soldiers who suffered death or years of imprisonment as a result of the collapse of the front, the suffering of the civilian population, and also the dramatic consequences for the people entrusted by Killinger in the legation, the question of the personal sensitivities of those responsible recedes into the background. If von Killinger had wanted, the anti-German conspiracy in Bucharest would have been nipped in the bud in time and Romania would have been occupied by the German Wehrmacht. An orderly withdrawal of the German army and a stubborn defense of the last mountain ranges of Transylvania and the Carpathians would have been possible. Due to the German-Romanian betrayal, not only the 6th but also half of the 8th Army with 22 divisions fell out on the German side with 286000 men dead and killed. Besides the loss of men, the material damage was also extremely high, since not only almost all heavy weapons and means of communication, but also the majority of motor vehicles and extensive quantities of supplies and ammunition fell into enemy hands. The number of German prisoners of war brought in by the Red Army can be estimated at 150,000. Of these, 55,000 died before being transported to the Soviet Union, a death rate that, with the exception of Stalingrad, has hardly been surpassed. Even today, the Red Cross is processing nearly 8,000 search requests for Wehrmacht members, the last news of whom was in Romania on August 20, 1944.^{1,2} In the strategic field, the German Reich had not only lost another ally as a result of the treacherous maneuvers, but also the oil from Romania that was so indispensable to the war effort. The entire German Balkan front was ruined. The narrowly avoided catastrophe in Hungary - How the "Operation Panzerfaust" stopped Stalin's "Operation Budapest" In his 1956 book *Betrayed Battles*, the former commander-in-chief of "Army Group South", Colonel General Hans Friessner, blamed his former brothers-in-arms in Romania and Hungary for the collapse of the southern flank of the German Eastern Front in the summer and fall of 1944.³ Although Friessner got the facts right, it could have been far worse for the German side.

Horthy's Hungary had entered the war on June 27, 1941, with a "desire for national expansion" against Germany's will. As early as September 9, 1943, however, the Magyars had betrayed their ally to the West and, by a secret agreement, had agreed to an unconditional Hungarian surrender in the event that Western Allied troops reached the Hungarian border.¹ Although the majority of the pro-German Hungarian army rejected an honorable change of alliance, however, negotiations with the Western Allies continued.² For example, on June 13, 1944, a Me 210 Ca-1 (ZO+88) attempted to deliver a secret message from the Hungarian government to the Allies in southern Italy. Due to lack of fuel, the crew had to make an emergency landing over German-occupied

territory. The pilot, Lieutenant Odescalchi, was shot for desertion at the end of 1944. After Romania's betrayal of the alliance, Hungary became a combat zone. On October 29, 1944, the Red Army launched a major attack toward Budapest. This was intended to catapult Hungary out of the war via a flank attack and, via a subsequent rapid push through Austria, bring the Red Army all the way to Munich. The Western Allies would have been tricked in this way. At that time, the Allies had not yet agreed on occupation zones for Austria. As early as November 4, 1944, however, German armored counterattacks were able to bring the Red Army to a halt just outside Budapest. This would have been different if the Hungarian allies had changed sides, as planned. A repeat of the fall of Romania loomed. In early September 1944, when Soviet and Romanian troops had entered Transylvania, Hungary had declared war on Romania. Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian >Reichsverweser<, however, made certain reshuffles in higher ministries that foreshadowed a change of political course, and in a pro-Soviet sense. Hitler knew at that time that Admiral Horthy was about to negotiate not only with the Western allies, but also with Stalin. If the Hungarians had defected to the enemy, 30 divisions with about 400,000 German soldiers would have been trapped. Those still fighting on the southern front in Italy would also have had a hard time if a Soviet offensive had developed from the south of Hungary across Yugoslavia toward Trieste and Udine, was Hitler's opinion. As the Soviets prepared their major offensive on Budapest, Admiral Horthy sent a delegation to Moscow on October 5, 1944, led by General Farago, Inspector General of the Gendarmerie. Farago received Horthy's instructions by radio during the night of October 11-12, 1944, to accept and sign the Russian terms of an armistice. This was accomplished on the 11th or, according to other accounts, the 12th of October 1944. General Farago later became a member of the first coalition government under Soviet occupation. In the basement of the Budapest Castle there was a secret transmitter that was in constant communication with Moscow. When the Germans later occupied the castle, the Hungarian radio officer in charge committed suicide. Admiral Horthy had sent a second group of negotiators to the Russians to contact directly the Soviet high command in Hungary under Marshal Malinowski. Malinowski had given them 48 hours to accept his terms on October 12, 1944, and had allowed the delegation to return across the front. Even an officer sent to Marshal Tolbuchin brought back no other result. By the time the delegation arrived at Castle Hill to report, it was too late. Instead of being received by the >Reichsverweser< Admiral Horthy, SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny captured the completely perplexed members on the Burgberg early in the morning of October 16, 1944. A day earlier, a German commando under Skorzeny had struck with the password >Operation Panzerfaust. Horthy's son Niklas was arrested in battle when he and his father tried to meet with negotiators Tnos for a parley. Horthy Sr. was allowed to escape >for the sake of form<. At

quickly and dangerously the situation here could come to a head. Everything that the High Command >Heeresgruppe Süd< learned about political events in Budapest it had learned through the plenipotentiary general of the German Wehrmacht to the Hungarian government, General von Greiffenberg, but not from its own superior office, the OKH. This was reminiscent of conditions in Romania. Troops on the ground also reported heavy strains of confidence from secret meetings of Hungarian generals and general staff officers in the area of the Army Group, at which German officers were not permitted. Also, secondments of Hungarian officers to Budapest without informing the German command authorities were commonplace at the time. When Hungary's change of front failed, army commander General Miklos abandoned his troops and defected to the Russians. Miklos, who deserted on October 17, 1944, set up a new headquarters 50 km north of Munkacs, the location of a Russian army corps. On October 19, in the name of Horthy, he ordered to take up the fight against the Germans and demanded to settle accounts with all Hungarians who took sides with the Germans. Since his order did not find any response, Miklos had leaflets dropped, with which he tried to incite the Hungarian soldiers. The radio station in Budapest, on the other hand, read out an order from Colonel General Vörös not to stop the fighting. General Vörös, the Hungarian Chief of General Staff, later went into hiding in the disguise of a monk, but was recognized and arrested by the Soviets. Then, on the morning of October 18, 1944, it became apparent that the night before, on the orders of the commander-in-chief of the 2nd Hungarian Army, the 2nd Hungarian Armored Division had, without the knowledge of the German leadership and without regard for its German front-line neighbors engaged in combat, abandoned its positions at a particularly important section. Reports also came from other sections of the front that the Honved units were disbanding. Officers and enlisted men no longer showed any will to fight. Neither the new Hungarian government of Szálasi nor the new Hungarian chief of staff, Belegfy, were recognized. While the fighting continued unabated, the high command of >Heeresgruppe Süd< had to take drastic measures to prevent the collapse of the front. The >Heeresgruppe Süd< decided to establish so-called >blocking lines< in the rear areas, the sole purpose of which was to catch retreating Hungarians in order to prevent panic and desertion. The Honveds collected in this way were sent by German field gendarmerie to special camps where they had to endure one or two days of hard training. The aim was to boost their morale and restore their discipline. Friessner's second measure was his order to give the commanding officers of the German troops a free hand to immediately arrest all commanders of the Hungarian units who proved incapable of performing the tasks assigned to them and to replace them with energetic suitable people regardless of their rank. Since these measures apparently did not show the desired results, Friessner went further on 1 December 1944. He signed an order permitting his troops to machine-gun surrendering allies who had gone over to the enemy: "Whoever is too cowardly to die in honor must die in dishonor." Nevertheless, the attitude of the Hungarian Army remained a recurring cause for concern for the German Wehrmacht until the end of the war. Indeed, as of late October 1944, only the Hungarian Air Force proved fully capable of standing up to the Soviets on equal terms. Hungarian fighter pilots recorded a steady increase in aerial victories, and German commanders could not praise enough the outstanding performance of the Hungarian paratrooper battalion. In fact, the Hungarian fighter pilots proved to be loyal and reliable allies of the Germans until the end of the war and were to be equipped with Me 262 jet fighters, but this did not happen. Through their courageous intervention in October 1944, the Germans succeeded at the last minute in preventing a repetition of the Romanian case. The bill for this was paid by the Soviet

troops, whose "Operation Budapest" came to a halt on November 4/5, 1944, with terrible losses. Stalin's bold concept of outmaneuvering the Western Allies via a wing advance all the way to Bavaria had failed. Had Horthy's treachery succeeded, Stalin's "great solution" might well have succeeded, and our post-1945 world would have looked different. It is amazing that it was not until 2012, some seven decades after the dramatic events, that the public was allowed to learn the truth about this concept through the Russian author Kamen Nevenkin.¹ One reason why the Hungarians failed where the Romanians succeeded is probably to be found in the fact that Hitler, who was born in Austria, traditionally had a love-hate relationship with Hungarians, characterized by traditional distrust, and was accordingly cautious in his disposition.² After the loss of Romania, the value of the Hungarian Plain was vital to the German war effort to gain time. At stake here were not only the oil fields of Nagyknizsa, vital for Germany's tanks and aircraft, but also the bauxite deposits of Szekesfehervar and the mines of Urkut, west of Veszperem, which represented the last remaining source of manganese for the Third Reich. The final decision in Hungary would not be made until March 1945. "Guardian angels" during "Operation Rösselsprung" in May 1944: Why Marshal Tito had such a narrow escape In 1943-45, five to eight German divisions had the unenviable task of securing the extraction of the mineral resources necessary for German warfare from Yugoslavia, which had been torn apart by partisan and ethnic strife. With a year to go before the end of the war, the Axis powers came within a hair's breadth of victory. On May 25, 1944, 800 soldiers of the 500th SS Parachute Battalion landed in Drvar, a small town behind enemy lines in northwestern Bosnia. This was the beginning of "Operation Rösselsprung" - one of the most daring commando operations of the World War II. Its objective was to capture or kill Yugoslav partisan leader Marshal Tito, aka Josip Broz<, at his headquarters. In February 1944, Tito had been forced to move his headquarters to Seviten in Drvar, in the Unac- valley, because of a German offensive. Front-line Abwehr reconnaissance squads under the direct control of the Abwehr Officer (Ic/AO) of >Heeresgruppe F< were reportedly unable to learn his exact whereabouts. However, a group of the >Brandenburger< Regiment under First Lieutenant Kircher, who was relieved by Major Benesch in February 1944, succeeded in doing so. Disguised as peasants or even partisans wearing Italian uniforms, this group managed to find out Tito's headquarters in Drvar. Their findings were supported by the German radio reconnaissance under Captain Wollny, who not only identified all signals, but was also able to determine by radio direction finding the exact position of the radio equipment of the British mission to Marshal Tito under radio officer MacLean. Thus, as early as March 24, 1944, the intelligence maps of the 15th Mountain Corps showed Tito's headquarters in Drvar. However, its exact address remained unknown for a long time.' This changed when SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny received orders from Hitler in the spring of 1944 to locate Tito's headquarters, destroy it and, if possible, capture the marshal.² Skorzeny therefore flew to Belgrade in April 1944 with two NCOs from his unit and patrolled Bosnia for four weeks. This turned out to be necessary, as he quickly discovered that the information he was receiving from appropriate Abwehr and SD (Sicherheitsdienst) agencies was inaccurate and contradicted each other. Skorzeny went to Zagreb (Agram) and organized his own intelligence service. He trusted three capable officers, each of whom was in charge of a different intelligence network. The agents of this network had to work independently of each other. Skorzeny did not want to react until he had received three matching messages. In the process, Skorzeny's people fell into the hands of a partisan deserter named Tetaric, who had previously been with the First Proletarian Corps of the Yugoslav partisans. Tetaric now revealed the exact location of Tito's personal headquarters in a cave above Drvar. Skorzeny also found out that there were 6000 partisans in the area and that Tito was guarded by a 350-man bodyguard. This information was exactly what was missing! Skorzeny now offered to send his men on such a risky attack against Tito's headquarters. But when he sent his deputy, Hauptsturmführer von Voelkersam, to Generaloberst

Rendulic, the head of "Army Group F", he got a terrible surprise. Rendulic informed von Voelkersam that General von Weichs wanted to launch his own attack mission against Tito's headquarters, to be supported by an air landing. Von Voelkersam was sent back to Skorzeny with this notice and told Skorzeny, "Something is wrong!" The mission was eventually carried out without Skorzeny's people. Skorzeny considered the mission betrayed. Nevertheless, on May 10, 1944, the SS had officially assigned to "Army Group F" its 500th Airborne Battalion for the Drvar mission. Its commander, SS Hauptsturmführer Rybka, was given the wrong location of Tito's headquarters in a cemetery near Drvar in his attack orders. On May 25, "Operation Rösselsprung" began with the combined parachute and airborne operations of the SS paratroopers, supported by 440 sorties of the German and Croatian air forces. The attacking force also quickly succeeded in getting hold of the town and the cemetery, which was thought to be the headquarters. They captured a huge amount of files as well as numerous Allied military journalists. Their mission was to make Tito's reputation known in the Western world. The long known knowledge that Tito's headquarters was in the cave above Drvar was not communicated to Rybka beforehand by the counterintelligence officer of "Heeresgruppe F". Why this was omitted, the reader can imagine. Thus, it was only in the course of the attack, almost by chance, that it was discovered that Tito was possibly in the cave. At the last moment he was able to escape from the cave through a secret hatch. All that the German paratroopers found was Tito's brand new marshal's uniform. In the meantime, a large crowd of heavily armed partisans had begun to put the deposed German troops in great distress. In the end, of 874 men landed there, just 250 were still unharmed. It was also noticeable that the initially very successful German and Croatian planes of "Fliegerführer Kroatien" did not make any more appearances from the second day of "Operation Rösselsprung". They had been grounded - in view of the "enemy superiority", as it was said.¹ An unbelievable event!

Surviving members of "Operation Rösselsprung" were then outraged in the postwar period that they had been so misled by false intelligence information. They also questioned why the attack plan had scheduled only one of six attack troops against the real headquarters, and not the entire available battalion. They also blamed the failure on faulty analysis of the numerous aerial photographs available. Tito had expected the worst when the attack on the cave began and had already put on all his marshal insignia so that he could have been identified after his expected death. The prisoners also included 20 British officers and 3 Allied journalists. Tom Churchill, the nephew of the English Prime Minister, narrowly escaped. Even when Tito succeeded in escaping from the cave, the marshal fell several times by a hair's breadth into the hands of the German troops now following by land. On the night of July 3, 1944, he therefore had to be evacuated ignominiously by an RAF "Dakota" transport plane to Bari in southern Italy. From there he returned after two nights by ship to the island of Vis in Dalmatia. Vis was the only important Dalmatian coastal island still in Allied hands after the German counterattack. It was guarded by a British commando brigade and a brigade of partisans. At the beginning of the Allied landing in Normandy, the Germans announced the end of the in the meantime quite successful "Operation Rösselsprung". The partisans were on the verge of their decisive defeat! By the end of June 1944, the Germans had also become aware of Tito's presence on the island of Vis. The 500th SS parachute battalion and Skorzeny's men were already preparing a new command mission. Again fate came to Tito's aid! According to Yugoslav and German sources, the July 20, 1944 attempt on Hitler's life made it impossible for Skorzeny to organize a new "Rösselsprung" on the Adriatic Sea. Skorzeny reported in his memoirs that Major Otto Beck, later head of the "SS Fighter Corps Italy", would have been very happy to attack Tito's island headquarters: "He was angry with me for a long time that I refused him the order to do so." Had von Stauffenberg unwittingly saved Tito? It should not be surprising in this context that Marshal Tito was warned by many sources against a German attack on his headquarters in Drvar in time. However Tito underestimated the danger of a possible air landing and

prepared his units for an attack from land. The land component of >Rösselsprung< then met fierce resistance. It fits in with this that on 13 May 1944, the Wehrmacht Joint Staff had sent the commander-in-chief of >Heeresgruppe F< principles for the execution of this enterprise. The precondition, according to the WFST, was "the total surprise of the enemy." ¹ This was an invitation to betrayal-which also took place immediately. However, one thing is striking: Although the British gave Tito massive political and military support, the Yugoslavs were not informed of the numerous incoming ULTRA warnings prior to >Operation Roesselsprung<. The Soviets repeatedly accused the British of this during the Cold War. Despite all obstacles, the Wehrmacht managed to assert itself in Yugoslavia so successfully that, for example, German chrome mining still reached record levels in 1944. It was not until Romania and Bulgaria changed sides and the Red Army intervened from the fall of 1944 that the Allies succeeded in pushing the Wehrmacht out of Yugoslavia. Without the Yugoslavian chrome, the clock ticked faster and faster for Germany's war economy.